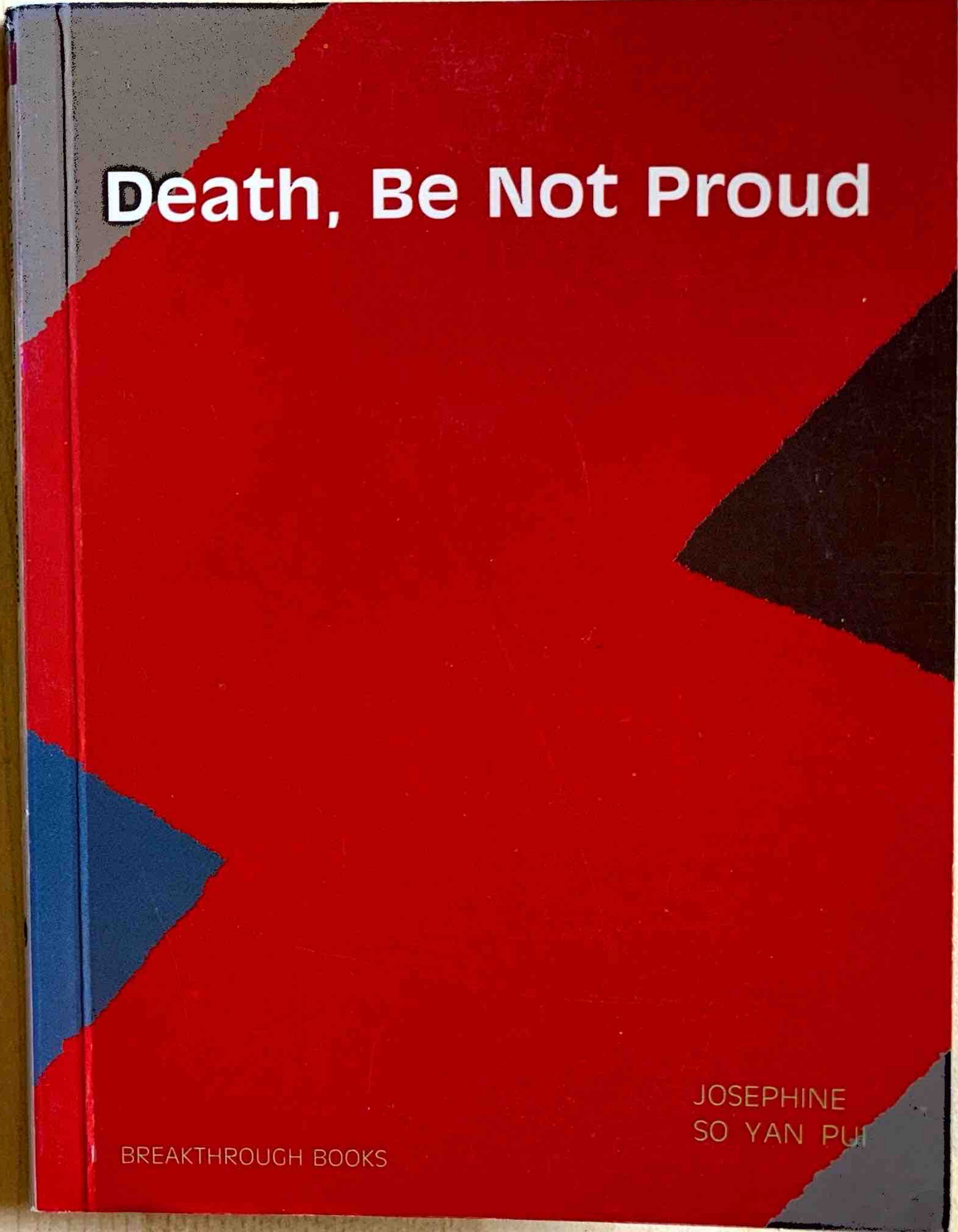

Death, Be Not Proud

JOSEPHINE
SO YAN PUI

BREAKTHROUGH BOOKS

Death, Be Not Proud

Josephine, So Yan Pui
translated by Ho Hing Kay

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JOSEPHINE,SO YAN PUI

Translated from the Chinese by
HO HING KAY
Edited by
CHAN LEE SOOK KIT
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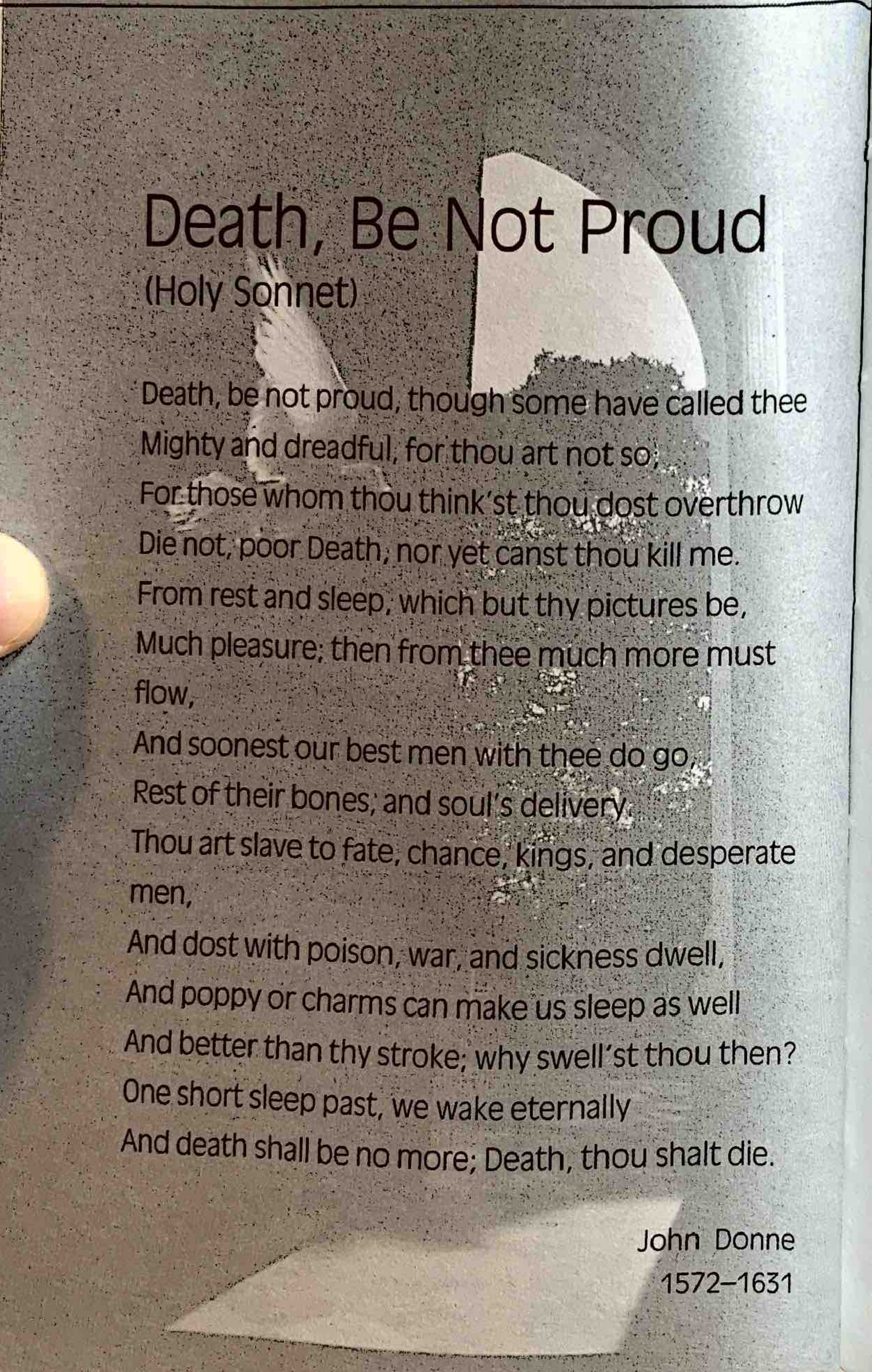

Death, Be Not Proud

(Holy Sonnet)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

John Donne
1572–1631

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Foreword

Josephine, So Yan Pui was my most beloved sister-in-Christ and my fellow warrior for the Lord for ten years. Her relatively short life on earth has left indelible marks in the lives of many Chinese young people throughout the world.

During her early years of ministry as a teacher in a primary school in Hong Kong. She was used by the Lord to lead many people to a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of these former students are actively serving the Lord today!

Her gift of writing blossomed during her years of study in the United States. Her earliest novel "Circuitous Paths" helped to challenge many Chinese students to take the Lordship of Christ seriously in the matter of courtship and marriage. In the novel, she also revealed her deep commitment to her kinsmen, most obvious was her burden to bring the gospel to her fellow-countrymen in China and Asia.

Compelled by the love of Christ, and compassion for her kinsmen, she returned to the East, after her training in North America. With the deep conviction that print-media could be effective in sharing the good news with young people, she gave her life to Christian literature work. In subsequent years, she served as the chief editor and founder of several highly influential Chinese Christian magazines "Campus", "Sentinel"; "Breakthrough" and "Breakthrough Junior". Most amazingly for the last twenty years of her life, she was carrying cancerous cells in her body, plus a whole spectrum of diseases that had affected most of her organs. Her favourite verse was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12:9) Though her body was fragile, her spirit was empowered by God. Though she was wrestling daily with death, yet one could not help but be touched by the vitality of her life.

"Death, Be Not Proud" is Josephine's song of victory over the ultimate enemy. On Easter morning 1982, she went to rest in her Heavenly Father's bosom. Through the resurrection of Christ, she claimed her final victory! Through her writings, and her discipling ministry, Josephine continues to live today.

Philemon Choi
General Secretary
Breakthrough
Hong Kong

About The Translator

Ho Hing Kay was born and raised in Hong Kong where she attended the same secondary school as the author. She studied Educational Psychology and obtained a doctorate from the University of Southern California. She is married with 2 teenage children and lives in California.

Introduction

I have been walking hand in hand with death since the early days of my youth.

In this book, I want to share my experiences of what it is like to live for twenty years under the threat of cancer. One of the issues I intend to deal with is whether the treatment made possible by advanced science and technology is blessing or woe. But more important than this, I wish to give witness, to testify that in my journey towards death, though under the curse and distress shared by all mankind, God intervened with blessings and transformed this weak victim into a useful instrument.

In the process of writing, I have kept to a straight forward and simple narrative style. This is because the story is dramatic enough by itself, and if I add anything to it, the message would be too burdensome.

Apart from "Death, Be Not Proud", I have written several pieces on the subject of death.* Death is not only my companion, it has been the source of my enlightenment. From death, I am learning lessons about life.

Note: "Death, Be Not Proud" can be considered a new publication. However, it does contain some of my older writings. The chapter describing my "major collapse" in Taiwan is based on the two essays I wrote at the time — "Blessings Only" and "Blessings Furthermore". I use them because they reflect my feelings at the time in a more revealing and real way. However, I have made a few revisions because at that time, I was not clear about the details of my illness. Now I understand the situation much more.

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*Those essays are not included in this translation.

Prelude

July, 1970
A Hospital in Taipei

I stood on the balcony of the hospital room brushing my hair.

Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Apart from the fact that I felt a little weak, I did not feel any discomfort. Yet my blood pressure was high, the systolic reading had risen to 180.

Looking at my tiny frail frame, and pale complexion, no one would have guessed that I was suffering from hypertension. No wonder the student nurse was baffled. "Why don't you double-check for me, I am afraid my reading may not be quite right," said the young nurse as she nudged her companion. She cast a glance at me and then at the sphygmomanometer.

Only three months before my blood pressure had plummetted to a low of 60, resulting in a blackout. After three months of convalescence, I was on the road to recovery. Yet, just as I was rejoicing at the prospect of good health, a sudden surge of blood pressure sent me back to the hospital again.

Who knew what was happening to my body chemistry?

I continued brushing my hair. Traffic pulsated at the intersection of Tun Hua Road South and Chung Cheng Road. Columns of cars flowed steadily past. The procession would come to a brief pause at the crossroads and then speed on. The lights kept flashing, the motorcades kept moving. What a charming night. Yet my blood pressure had risen to 180.

Life in metropolitan Taipei continued: the merry laughter of the night-club singers, the high-kicking of the chorus girls, the shadowed seclusion of tables in the Tea Houses, poker games, majong...... This night was not different from any other night. Yet my blood pressure was at 180 .

The massacre in Vietnam was still ruthlessly proceeding, the Arab-Israeli shellings had not ceased. This night was no different from other nights. Yet my blood pressure was rising with every passing minute.

I had come to my own conclusion that it must be another calcium imbalance in my blood. The doctor seemed to agree with my suspicion.

"There is no way they will completely remove your parathyroid glands. You won't be able to live without them," a third year medical student blurted out as he came to visit me. His companion, his senior, muttered in a more subdued tone, "You will have to depend on medications to keep functioning from now on."

It was true. Anyone who has had their thyroid glands and parathyroid glands completely removed has no other option but to depend on medications to stay alive.

"The diagnosis must have been mistaken. If you had cancer of the thyroid gland at the time, you could not have made such an excellent recovery and maintained it for such a lengthy period of time," proclaimed a young resident as he took my medical history. Such audacity! In a few words, he had repudiated the consensus of experts from several esteemed hospitals.

Another doctor who was a Christian had a different reaction. After reviewing my medical history, he said, "Yes, it is a miracle."

November, 1970
A Hospital in Hong Kong
——Department of Radiotherapy

It was my third day of diagnostic testing with radioisotopes.

I lay motionless under that mysterious apparatus which seemed to be able to move in all sorts of directions with ease. Silence enveloped me. Even my thoughts almost came to a standstill. The only intrusion was the 'click' emitted by the equipment every time it changed position. The rhythmic droning almost sent me to sleep, and I fell into a semi-conscious trance.

With a final 'click', the machine stopped. The technician came over and helped me up. I watched as she rolled up the paper filled with lines and dots. We had a similar piece of paper yesterday. It recorded the readings of the electric signals emitted by the machine as it scanned my body.

"Maybe we'll get the results to-day?" I asked the technician gingerly.

She hesitated and then said, "Probably. When you see the doctor in a few minutes, he will be able to tell you." Then she changed to a warmer and kinder tone, "How do you feel? Any discomfort?"

From her tone of voice, I guessed the results.

"Doctor, I would like to know the test results." I surprised myself with my own calmness.

"Well......well......" the radiologist replied slowly, "We have this situation......But fortunately, your cancer is growing at a very slow rate, and at this stage your body can still absorb iodine. It has probably been a few years since the cancer invaded the lungs, but as long as we can control it, and keep it from spreading to other areas, you should be able to live for a long time. Eight years, ten years, or maybe more......who knows......?"

He continued, "Your kind of cancer is the most benign of all cancers of the thyroid gland."

Then he paused, and screwing his face into an expression of mixed sobriety and jest, he added, "If I had to contract cancer, I would pick your variety."

September, 1977

A Hospital in Hong Kong

——Department of Internal Medicine

The doctor had ordered me back to the hospital again, this time because of a loss of stability in my blood pressure. I went through another series of tests including the latest kidney tests and blood vessel tests. The whole thing was wearing my patience thin.

However, it had become routine for me to be in and out of hospitals. I had come to accept the facts of life though it was nevertheless bothersome.

On one of the mornings when I did not have a test, I sat on my bed reading, my mind resigned to the unrelenting facts. The Professor of Internal Medicine who was in charge of my case came into my room trailed by a group of residents. It was time for bed-side teaching.

This Professor had known me for quite a while — in fact, from the days when she started as a resident. She was one of those doctors who took her work seriously and always treated her patients with gentleness and kindness.

The Professor muttered a whole string of medical terms which were totally incomprehensible to me. But there were a few distinct sentences which I understood completely. I was so grateful for those words of encouragement. She said, "This patient leads a very active life. Her work is meaningful and she has made a great contribution to society. Her case can be regarded as a miracle."

Blissful Ignorance

Queen Jocasta:
"For Heaven's sake, if you care for
your own life,
Don't seek it!
But I beseech you, hearken!
Do not do it!"

Oedipus Rex

When I was in college, I took some courses in Greek tragedy. One of the plays that left a lasting impression on me was Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. King Oedipus was a noble, valiant and earnest man whose life ended in the most ill-fated tragedy. He found out that not only was he guilty of patricide in slaying of his father, but that he had also committed the utmost atrocity by taking his mother as his bride. This all happened when he was completely ignorant of the circumstances. But when the naked truth emerged, he found himself incapable of accepting the frightening cold snare of reality.

The tragic plot of Oedipus Rex is rife with unexpected turns. The ancient Greeks nurtured a profound understanding of the complexity of life. They were able to penetrate the intricacy of human relationships, to fathom the sinister shadow that underlies our actions. King Oedipus' strength became his weakness: his impulsiveness, persistence and determination in the pursuit of truth became the root of his tragedy. I will not go into other details, except on the concept of 'wanting to know'. The ancient Greek and Hebrew philosophers knew well that with knowledge comes agony. If one insists on finding out the truth about a matter, one should be ready to pay the price of infinite trouble and grief at the end.

I am a cancer patient. But until 1970, I was completely unaware that I was harboring cancer cells in my body. Was this a blessing or not?

I remember being in a discussion group at a Christian fellowship meeting in the medical school once. The theme was "The Practice of Ethics for the Christian Physician." One of the topics we covered was whether doctors should tell their cancer patients the truth. I was in one of the core groups, speaking from the standpoint of Christain ethics. I remember I assumed a somewhat objective position and strongly advocated telling the patient the whole truth so that he could be aware that he had reached a critical point in his life. Such occasions call for serious searching and important decision-making and the patient should be prepared for it both mentally and emotionally. A patient has the right to know what is going to happen to him, so that when the moment of crisis arrives, he will not feel cheated by death because he is being snatched away unexpectedly and has to depart nursing lasting regrets.

At the time, I participated in the discussion with vigor, never for a moment dreaming that I might be the central figure in the discussion. When I thought about it afterwards, the whole scene seemed so much like the dramatic irony we read about in plays. So there I was, a member of the cast in an ancient Greek tragedy!

When the confirmation that I had cancer came, I woke up to the fact that it was no news to my family, relatives, friends, and school-mates. They all knew. I was the only one in the dark!

I understood the gravity of my illness. I knew my thyroid gland and a lot of lymphatic tissues had to be removed and that I would also have to undergo radiotherapy. But I thought that was all that needed to be done and I never suspected anything else. I was young at the time and did not know much about medical matters. Such ignorance brought me bliss.

But such ignorance also brought tragedy later.

Today, I still advocate letting the patient know the truth. No matter how piercing and painful the truth is, the patient has the right to know and thus prepare to face his fate. However, I cannot help but be thankful for those days when I was covered by the veil of ignorance. In those days, I was free of dark shadows lurking in my mind. I was like any other young girl, planning for my future, dreaming about the days ahead...... Just like any ordinary girl, I had my flights of fancy...... (To know the truth is a privilege, but it is also a privilege to dream! It is still a privilege to be able to dream — even though the happiness it brings is ephemeral.) During those 'ignorant' days, I studied like any normal person, I worked; in fact, I worked harder than most people, with more vigor, with more vivacity. I traversed the oceans, walked on distant lands, with not a single speck of worry in the world.

It is not in the power of our finite minds to perceive whether a given situation is fortunate or not. However, when the truth was revealed, my blissful state of ignorance came to an end. I had to look my illness in the eye and face its consequences. I changed — I became more cautious, encumbered with worries. Has not this insight been revealed to us in Ecclesiastes?

"For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief."

Ecclesiastes 1:18

If God Takes Back...

"If God takes back what we deem as precious, that is because He has something more precious in store for us."

A Missionary

It is difficult for those who didn't get to know me till my later years to imagine what a robust person I used to be. After years of poor health and neglect on my part, my body succumbed to frailty. I degenerated into a weakling of the classic kind, as portrayed by Lin Tai Yu (Dream of the Red Chamber). But health used to be one of my assets.

I weighed eight pounds when I came into this world a crying infant — a record to be proud of. From infancy to early childhood, I was like a plump little doll, winning people with my rosy cheeks and sweet dimples. Everybody loved to hold me — according to the faithful account of my grandmother and aunts. As far as I can remember, I was never sick. I was healthy, strong and full of good intentions. Whenever my mother made chicken broth, I would think of my three younger sisters with their pale complexions and skinny bodies. I would say to my mom, "Save the chicken broth for the younger ones, I don't need it."

Although I was not an accomplished athlete, I loved outdoor life. Hiking and mountain climbing were my favorite activities. We used to love the challenge of hiking up Tai Mo Shan with one of our British teachers. We would walk continuously uphill for three hours without stopping, and we would not consider that at all strenuous. Another time, my old chums and I went wandering in the foothills early one morning on a public holiday, meandering among the brooks and bushes of Victoria Peak. We came across a conduit which leads to the summit. All of a sudden, we got this crazy idea to scale the conduit all the way up to the Peak. I don't remember whose suggestion it was, probably mine. Anyway, without hesitation, we all decided to give it a try. The ascent was pretty steep, what's more, the conduit turned out to be nothing more than a round ditch, with hardly any space for footing. We literally had to climb on all fours, and the expedition became more treacherous as we worked our way up. There were times when the loosening of a grip or the slip of a foot would mean an immediate plunge down the abyss. We made it to the summit, though not without a lot of sweating and panting and getting ourselves dirty in the process. However, the sense of achievement was so great that we burst into shouts of joy. Today, I can still recall the sweetness of that moment of elation.

This incident may just seem like one of the many reckless things young people do, but it does serve to prove that my body was once healthy and strong. My heart and lungs had always been in good order. Apart from my stomach which gets a little sensitive at times, all my other vital organs were in excellent condition and functioning to full capacity. So, even with an imagination that often went out of bounds, it had never occured to me that it was my lot to be riddled with sickness.

I was not only blessed with good health, but somewhere within me was latent musical talent clamouring to burst forth.

When I was young, if someone were to ask me what my first love was, I would unhesitantly reply: Music (or, to be more specific — singing). I was like a Mongolian lark, singing all the time. I had an endless repertoire of songs , but I also had songs that I had made up myself. I sang to tell the world I was happy. I also sang to tell of my sadness.

I believe I did once possess a beautiful voice. My two older brothers used to love to listen to me sing. When they came home for the summer holidays from abroad, they would urge me to play the piano and sing their favorite love songs for them. Though I was young and innocent, I was somehow able to melt into the emotions of the songs. After I finished each song, my brothers and their friends would always be deeply touched.

I don't remember which year it was now. My brother gave me a Marian Anderson record for Christmas. With the gift came some precious words of encouragement. What a doting brother! He really thought his baby sister would follow in the foot-steps of Marian Anderson. To be truthful, though I was young and ignorant, I did realize I was not blessed with the talent of this most famous black female singer of the century (you only have to look at her robust chest to understand where the powerful resonance comes from). My voice teacher had warned me that with my small stature, I would be more suited to chamber music and lyric songs. I still had my dream, my ambition.

That year, I started voice lessons. I had plans to learn French and Italian, I was longing to see Europe......

That very year, the year that was to be the turning point in my life ——

That year, I underwent four operations, three complete rounds of radiation therapy. My health was destroyed, my voice was annihilated.

Actually, no one knew when the cancer cells started to invade my body. Earlier, I had noticed that my neck was getting thicker. However, the doctor said that was 'part of the normal maturing process of girls' and we did not take any more notice of it. Later, there was a growth in my throat, a hard piece that resembled something like a tumour. But we didn't take much notice of that either. Our family was not in the habit of consulting doctors regularly, and since my general health had no other cause for concern......

Life went on as usual until the summer of that year. Without any symptoms, without any warning, I suddenly lost my voice. I could not make a sound for ten full days, and even though I could speak again after that, my voice became hoarse.

That summer, I consulted many medical experts, took numerous doses of antibiotics and cough syrups, but to no avail. It was not until I saw an ENT (Ear, Nose, Throat) specialist that my neck problem was taken into account. He referred me to a thyroid specialist who began to unravel the mystery of my illness.

A series of tests followed. Finally, the doctor sent me to the hospital for a biopsy. That was the first time in my life that I entered a hospital, the first time I had an operation of any kind. I cannot say I was not worried at the time, or bothered, but I don't remember being overly anxious or being overcome by any serious misgivings. Years later, after the truth of my illness was revealed to me, my family recounted that at the time, a group of medical specialists debated the diagnosis of my case most vigorously. They held meeting after meeting, debating whether it was cancer or not, and trying to decide whether they should remove the entire thyroid glands plus many of the lymphatic glands.

Of course, I had no way of knowing about the doctors' discussions and conclusions. But how could I fail to observe the reaction of my family and friends! For someone who has always taken pride in her sensitivity and keen observation it is inconceivable how the worry in their faces and the trouble in their eyes could have escaped me! To this day, I have difficulty explaining this phenomenon.

Nowadays, cancer has become very widespread and treatments have improved. Recovery rates have risen and the threat of cancer has subsided a little. But in those days, the shadow of cancer was like a "psychological cancer". The fear of cancer could be more devastating than cancer itself. When I come to think of it, I realize what a heavy burden my parents had been carrying on my behalf. The shadow of cancer loomed over their heads day in, and day out.

Bathed in the ignorance of the severity of my case, I spent a few light-hearted days in the hospital. The biopsy was relatively simple. Though I did have general anesthesia, it only took me a day or two to be fully back to normal. At the time, it happened that a good friend of mine was in the same hospital for some reason. We banded together and went around the hospital talking, chatting and having a great time. In our childish way, we filled those days with fun and laughter.

Unfortunately, those moments were brief. The storm was already gathering on the horizon and impending darkness was about to strike.

My good friend started her treatment. The side effects of the therapy caused her hair to fall out until she finally became bald. This period of illness had taken her through some very dark valleys. What she went through both physically and emotionally cannot be described in a few words. I began to sense the urgency of the matter.

In the hospital, I was moved from a public room to a semi-private room. The doctors and nurses started to talk to me about an impending major operation. The plan was to remove the tumor in my neck and do a thyroidectomy at the same time. They were ever so tactful in breaking the news to me, careful not to upset me emotionally. All I did was to nod my head obediently in agreement. The term "thyroid gland" was totally alien to me. I had no idea what its functions were, or how important it was. I had never thought much about it.

However, a major operation is a major event. I could not help but be a little apprehensive. But it was not until the day before the operation, when my parents came to see me that I first realized the gravity of the matter. Their faces told it all. That morning, I was still very calm, feeling quite at ease. But after their visit in the afternoon, my peace was shattered. Their faces were riddled with worry and I was troubled. In fact, I became very impatient with them. "An operation is no big deal, how come you are so nervous?" Not knowing how to handle their grief, I had turned my embarrasement into wrath. To smooth things out, I pretended there was nothing the matter and kept coaxing them to go home to rest. I begged them not to return in the evening. Oh, how my ignorance betrayed me at the time. How little did I perceive the agony wrenching my parents' hearts.

At nightfall, my parents came to visit me again. This time, the scene became even more awkward. My father was so restless that he kept pacing up and down. He wanted to express his concern but somehow couldn't find the right words. I never thought things could get so bad. I was totally unprepared for it and was at a loss what to do.

Finally, visiting hours drew to a close. My parents tarried for a while and eventually left. Before he left, my father came to my bedside and put his hand on my forehead. He felt my forehead, then my palm and muttered to himself, "Do you have a fever?" Of course, I was not running a fever. My father knew very well that I did not have a temperature. It was rather that the Chinese people of the older generation are not used to expressing their feelings. My dear father was heart-broken at this moment of crisis but did not know how to convey his concern to his beloved daughter...... My guard was down and I was completely softened up. I spoke to them tenderly and told them not to worry, but to trust the Lord for all things. I saw them to the door, my parents' eyes were red. I turned around quickly and went back to my room. Tears streamed down my cheeks. It was the first time I ever prayed about my safety: "Heavenly Father, for the sake of my parents, please keep me safe through this operation, because I cannot bear to see them hurt."

Apart from this little episode, my heart was unusually peaceful. The night before the operation, the doctor and nurses spoke to me extra tenderly and tried to make me feel at ease: "Are you afraid? There is no need to fear!" I shook my head and said with a smile, "I am not afraid."

The strange thing was that I was really not afraid. To harbor some fear would actually have been normal. Then where did I get this peace of mind? Just before they wheeled me to the operating room and put me under anesthesia, I had this one very simple thought: "I will immediately lose consciousness. When I wake up, there can only be two possibilities. I will either remain on this side of the river or will arrive on the other shore. Both options seemed equally good to me. Of course, I would be happy to return to this side. On this shore, I have my precious family, friends. But if I should wake up on the other shore, there would be thousands of angels welcoming me to the Lord's bosom. I would see the glorious face of my Savior, and I would see my precious little sister...... "

At this point, it became clear to me that I had in my hands the certainty of eternal life. That was why death held no fear for me.

At my first brush with death, I discovered that death was not so dreadful. In fact, there was a strange beauty to it.

My hospital room faced west. When the long French windows were opened, the whole western view of the harbor stood before my eyes. Even if I remained in my bed, I could clearly see the ocean in the west from the smaller window. In the evening, maybe I would catch a lone sail-boat gliding in the glittering light towards the sunset. The final destination in life seems to me just like the place where the sun sets in its golden glory. No one knows what lies beyond the mountains, but it is beckoning and bursting with mysteries.

I have always found death to be inspirational, and I used find it to be romantic. When I was in Junior High, I used to love wandering in grave yards. There was a cemetery that was in effect a big memorial park, poised on a hillside by the ocean. In the spring, it would be covered with blossoming Bauhinia and rhododendrons. The lilac petals would gently fall on the statue of the angel with the melancholy face......

I loved to stand in front of each tombstone and meditate. Each epitaph unraveled the story of someone's life, told in tears from the memories of loved ones. A special one remains distinctly in my mind. It was the epitaph of two sisters who died in an airplane accident together on the way to Shanghai (it was a long time ago). Their parents inscribed every detail of the event on the tombstone and one could almost feel their grief leaping out of the stone. There was also a very small gravestone on which the date of birth and death were the same. To parents, even the memory of a newborn who began and ended life on the same day was precious.

I used to sit for hours on the steps by the tombstones, thinking, thinking about life in general. There we have lifeless stones telling the stories of life itself. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the silent bay with just that one lone sail-boat dancing in the glittering light towards the boundless horizon.

To be sure, death held no strong fears for me. But to continue to live was not a simple task either.

From the moment I woke up from my anesthesia, I began to face severe testing. The difficulties were not confined to the physical suffering from the operation or pain from the treatments . Of course, I didn't feel well at all after the surgery, but that kind of discomfort subsided in time. My real trial came when I discovered that I had lost my voice. My beautiful singing voice had left me forever.

That devastating moment came when I tried to sing after I had recovered from my surgery and was feeling stronger. To my dismay, not even a single note came out.

Many years have passed since then. Now, no one knows I was once a minstrel, even I have trouble recalling that I once possessed a beautiful voice. It is impossible for me to describe the agony I went through in those days. I only remember that I fought hard to get my voice back. I would not accept the truth. I would struggle to sing a note, only to discover that there was no note. I then placed my hope on the time when the stitches would heal, maybe then my voice would return. But when my wound healed, my voice never returned. What I did not realize at the time was that my vocal chords were already damaged. None of the doctors had explained this to me. None of them had any notion that it would be of such significance to me.

The only person who could fathom my grief was the missionary who was sharing my sick-room. She witnessed those silent tears coming down my cheeks, she understood my inner struggle. She was the last person to hear me sing before my operation. It was a beautiful evening, the sun was setting in its glorious golden splendour. I couldn't help but sing very softly the hymn, "Beyond the Sunset". Although my voice was already a little husky at the time, there was still some of that original quality left in it.

"I love to hear you sing", she said affectionately: "You have a very sweet voice."

"It is a little hoarse lately," I quickly explained to her: "It sounds a little strange even to me. I don't know what will happen after my operation—"

She must have sensed my anxiety. Maybe she had guessed what was going to happen and she was the only person who was able to comfort me. From what she said, the Lord was able to teach me how to see things through spiritual eyes in the proper perspective.

I have long since forgotten her name. After I left the hospital, I did not keep in touch with her. But these words of hers, spoken with tender understanding and permeated with wisdom, gave me encouragement for the rest of my life—: "If God takes back what we deem as precious, it is because He has something even more precious in store for us."

At the time, I could not imagine what could be "more precious". All I knew was that I lost something that was dearest to me.

I recovered fairly quickly from the major surgery. Just as I was celebrating my speedy recovery and was getting ready for normal life again, the real shock pressed closer to home. I was only out of the hospital for two weeks when the doctor started to discuss another operation. He said there were some swollen lymph glands on the right side of my neck that required further surgery. I didn't ask too many questions. I quietly submitted to another major operation.

Shortly after surgery, I began radiation treatment. I knew nothing about radiation. The doctor explained a few things to me. He said that he was going to give me a fairly strong dosage. There would be no pain involved during the actual treatment, but I would feel some side effects afterwards.

I could not imagine how serious the "side effects" could be and how they could affect me for the rest of my life. But I soon found out. After the first session, I could not move for three days and three nights. The whole world was spinning around and I had no idea what was going on. I kept throwing up and could not hold any food down. The whole radiation treatment experience turned out to be absolute agony. Although all I did was to sit quietly by the machine each time I went to the hospital for treatment, and was subjected to no pain at the time, my body was slowly changing day by day. The first noticable change was the color of my skin in the neck area. It turned dark and looked burnt. I found it most disfiguring and I had to wear a scarf to cover up every time I went out. The next thing was a total loss of my sense of taste. Everything I ate became bitter and very unappetizing. My poor mother wracked her brain to find something I could eat each day. At the same time, my throat developed this dry, burning sensation and I needed a lot of water just to keep it moist. Sometimes, the pain was deadening. Many a night I could not go to sleep because of the pain in my throat. My mother would stay by my bedside and pray for me. On top of this, I had a nagging cough and kept getting phlegm in my throat. Sometimes I coughed so much that my chest would hurt and I could hardly breathe. The sputum kept collecting in my throat and I had to keep spitting it out. How can the pen describe those days of agony on paper!

The radiation treatments finally came to an end. My health had deteriorated considerably by then. It took me two to three months to slowly recuperate. Then the doctor suggested surgery for the fourth time. It wasn't easy for the doctor to break the news to me about a fourth operation, but he had found some more swollen lymph glands on the left side of my neck and they had to be removed. When the doctor saw the stupefied expression on my face, he quickly added: "This time, it is only minor surgery, you will recover in no time. In fact, we don't need to put you under general anesthesia. We will just give you a local." (In reality, it turned out that recovery was slowest from this surgery. Maybe after radiation therapy my body was no longer as strong as it used to be.)

So, I underwent my fourth operation.

All of this I was able to accept very meekly, never asking too many questions, nor putting up any resistance. But when the doctor started to mention radiation treatment, I could not hold back my tears. They came rolling down my cheeks as I sat across from my doctor. This young man who had just begun his career at the time and who was to become a well-known radiation specialist later, looked at me sympathetically and wracked his brain for a few comforting words to say. He understood why I cried. I could have endured any kind of operation. But how was I to face the painful consequences radiation treatment causes my body? Actually, at the time, I had not even begun to understand the kind of suffering radiation would bring me for the rest of my life.

After my last round of radiotherapy, I had changed into another being. There was a long period of time when I was not only unable to sing, but was not even able to talk. I had to resort to hand signals when I needed to express myself. Otherwise, I kept silent.

Keeping silent is not in my nature. Ever since elementary school, I would come home with prizes in story-telling, speech-making, debating etc. I was a class representative and a student council representative. I was good at public speaking, I was good at expressing myself in words. I liked hearing my own voice. Now, I had to learn the value of keeping silent. In a world where I could not hear my own voice, I learnt to listen to others more carefully, and to listen to God's voice.

Eventually, I did get my voice back. It turned a little husky and I didn't like the sound of it any more. Besides, I had difficulty speaking, so I kept silent most of the time. As to singing, the cruel reality was iron-clad. There followed many years when I could not sing at all. Of course, the dream of following in the foot-steps of Marian Anderson had evaporated. But even the small pleasure of singing on a Sunday with the congregation or singing in any meetings had eluded me. I didn't have the pleasure of joining in the singing and praising with everybody. People would see me staring at the words in the hymnal and never opening my mouth. They must have thought that I was kind of strange. Who would have guessed that my heart and soul were beating to the rhythm of the hymn, with my heart bled....... Maybe one can say that this made me take note of the words of the hymns more seriously, but I still longed to sing. My heart ached with such yearnings....... On several occasions, I would go to a voice recital and listen to other people sing. Seated in the audience, I found myself swallowing tears. My dream, my heart's desire, which I had nursed for so many years, had been completely shattered.

My road to recovery was punctuated by disappointment after disappointment. I had hung on to the hope that some day, normal health would return to me. However, after all those operations and radiation treatments, I discovered that from that point on, I could no longer function on my own. I was completely dependent on medications to stay alive. I had to take three sets of medication each day: thyroid pills, to replace the functions of the thyroid glands; calcium pills, and another heavy dosage of vitamin D. I did not understand the purpose of the latter two kinds of pills for a long time. Eventually, I found out that they were to supplant the functions of the missing parathyroid glands.

I had no idea that the doctor had to spend a great deal of thought balancing the doses of the three types of medication. Furthermore, different doctors had different opinions. I did not understand what was going on. All I knew was that my entire body didn't feel quite right and my health was oscillating up and down. Sometimes I would grow so tired that I could hardly move; sometimes I would feel such pressure on my chest that I had trouble breathing. Maybe it was caused by an inadequate dosage of one of the medications, which would in turn upset my endocrine system. I did not understand any of this at the time. I was just heart-broken. How could I have become such an abnormal person?

The period after the fourth operation is one of the incidents that remains clear in my memory. The surgeon had prescribed a heavy dosage of thyroid medication for me. Soon, I found myself almost unable to stay alive. I lost weight rapidly and I seemed to be consuming an enormous amount of food. I had to eat every two to three hours. The food did not seem to fill me for long. In a moment, it was all burnt up. Then I would find myself trembling, sweating and feeling dizzy. To add to the horror, my pulse rate would increase rapidly. My heart would beat so fast that I thought it was about to pop out of my body.

While my body was going through all these physical afflictions, my inner life was also going through a significant change. Just before my illness my life had gone through a metamorphosis. Once a completely self-centered person, I had surrendered the claim to my own destiny, and had chosen the path of the cross in following Jesus Christ. But before my illness, this "surrender" was a mental promise only. There was little in my life or behavior that testified to it. It was not until I was in the midst of the battle with suffering and distress that I started to learn the lessons of obedience, patience and faith.

Considering all the afflictions mankind shares among its people, this was the first time I realized how many people were taking their share in silence. In the waiting room of the government hospital, suffering was seen not only in the yellowed hollows of the eye; the bulging swellings; the skinny remains of a skeleton. Suffering also meant loss of job, poverty, abandonment by one's own family....... I watched this crowd of distressed people in mute silence, letting the pangs of their agony slowly seep into my heart. I began to experience their plight, and I found my emotions melting into this big cauldron, identifying with all the grief of mankind.

At the same time, I was freed from the routines of life, freed from daily chores. I had a chance to rest, stay quiet, admire the incipient beauty of the universe, to drink from the fountain of life.

During those days of convalescence, before I was well enough to return to regular activities, I spent my time wandering around on my own. I loved to linger on mountain paths in the early mornings. I loved to listen to the sounds of nature, smell the breath of the good soil, touch a leaf, fondle a blade of grass, or feel a bud sparkling in the sunshine. In the evenings, I loved to go up to the roof-top and look out to the ocean to the west, and lose myself in thought. I would stand and watch till the rosy clouds disappeared with the sunset and the evening mist would envelop me, until the first star emerged for the night.

In the days I spent walking hand-in-hand with nature, I grew to maturity. I drank from the fountain of life, singing praises, meditating, praying, reading the Bible, examining my own life. Gradually, the metamorphosis was complete, without my being conscious of it. I was not aware of it until I noticed that people had changed their behavior toward me. I found that they encompassed me with so much love, so much tender loving care. Yet, they attributed it to a reflection of my love toward them.

I had prayed to the Lord to allow me to become a free flowing channel, a channel of blessing for others. Then he started to teach me: A bamboo pole cannot be used as an irrigation pipeline until it is hollowed out; an olive cannot yield oil for the lamp until it is pressed; a candle cannot give light until it is lit; and a seed cannot give birth to new life until it is buried in the ground. These seem to be the everlasting truths and mysteries of the universe.

I dare not say that it would not be painful to be hollowed out, nor tormenting when you are pressed, or agonizing when you are set alight. Most of all, the days buried under the ground without seeing light would be most difficult to bear. But when I come to think back on those days of "blessings in disguise", I finally came to accept those wise words of the missionary: "If God takes back what we deem as precious, it is because He has something more precious in store for us."

Days Of Solitude In The Loft

Lead, kindly light,
amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on;
The night is dark,
and I am far from home,
Lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
The distant scene;
One step enough for me.

John Henry Newman

My head was spinning around and I could feel the strength draining from me rapidly. I sprawled helplessly on my desk and summoned all my remaining energy to call out to my colleagues:

"I think I am going to faint again. Please get me to the doctor ...... "

The doctor's initial diagnosis was low blood pressure (60/40), a very weak heart, and anaemia of the brain.

I had just finished editing the Campus Magazine, volume 12, number 2 the day before and had sent it to the publisher. I was very tired at the time, but since the pressure was lifted, I felt a sense of relief. I remember saying to my colleagues jokingly, "It is all finished. So am I." I never guessed that those words would be "prophetic".

Thus began the days when intravenous feeding was the only way I could get my nutrients and my digestive system became a chemical factory.

The doctor's orders were: "Complete rest. You may listen to music, but nothing else."

A Christian couple who dearly loved the Lord immediately took me into their home. Uncle and Auntie Chang's children had all gone abroad and they were living in a big mansion by themselves. It was sort of lonesome for them. What a blessing that they had this generous, loving spirit and were always glad to take the needy under their wing. In their house, there was a loft facing east which nobody used. It became my nest during my convalescence.

Thus began my days of solitude in the loft.

That happened in early 1970.

At the time, I did not know that I had cancer. All I knew was that I had a history of serious illness. My thyroid glands had been completely removed and I knew I had to take medications indefinitely. But that had been the status quo for a long time. For a whole year after my operations and radiation treatments, I became very frail and was inundated with health problems. However, slowly but surely, my strength returned to me. Thanks to my strong constitution, I was able to come away victorious from this battle with illness. In no time, my physical appearance returned to normal and I was able to lead a normal life once more. Even my voice had recuperated unexpectedly well. Of course, it never returned to its original quality, and my dream of becoming a singer was over. So when I found myself able to sing again after a few years, I was grateful to accept the new reality though it meant I was no longer a soprano and had to learn to sing alto.

Although I had to go back to the hospital for regular check-ups, the doctors did not give me much trouble. I was able to hold a job like any normal person, and on top of that, I carried some fairly heavy responsibilities in church and did volunteer work with other organizations.

Then I went overseas to study in the United States. During my few years as a student, I never once went to see a doctor. I did not see the need for check-ups and since I was out of reach of my regular attending physicians, I thought I would make the best of my "freedom" and enjoy it to the utmost. At the time, my older brother was practising medicine in Canada. Every time he wrote me, he would urge me to be careful of my health and go for regular check-ups. I never took much notice of his advice and just let it pass. The only thing I remembered was that he said if ever I had a problem, I should consult an endocrinologist. (This piece of information was to save my life later when I suddenly became ill.) Early during my stay in the U.S., I was able to eat well and enjoy the fresh air and even gained some weight. But later, due to academic pressures, I started to lose weight again.

Before I left the United States, I made several important decisions for my life, one of which was to place myself in an unfamiliar mission field — to work with the Campus Evangelical Fellowship in Taiwan. I joined the ranks of the Christian workers on campus. Our student center was located directly across from the entrance of the University of Taipei. However, our outreach included high schools all over the island of Taiwan as well as other post-secondary colleges. Our targets were those tender souls that were thirsting and yearning to open up to the Truth. We provided personal counselling, small group Bible studies, major gatherings, retreats and gospel camps to keep in touch with them. They treated us as older brothers and sisters. We had established excellent rapport with these young people and some of the resulting friendships have proved to be deep and long lasting.

My four years in Taiwan were well - spent. They were years of high productivity, and very fulfilling. (The candle was burning itself down.)

The days were full and rewarding (on average, I might get four to five hours of sleep a night. Some nights, I worked through without sleep). Apart from the work with the Campus Evangelical Fellowship, I had taken up the post of editor-in-chief of the bi-monthly "Campus" magazine. That was taxing pioneer work, breaking brand new ground, but the potential was enormous. People said that the magazine was a great success. I just felt the work was abundantly rewarding. The "Campus" magazine was revolutionized under me. I brushed up its contents and gave it a new style, so we attracted an even larger number of readers. Contributions began to pour in that were of exceptional quality and stimulated some vigorous debates and discussions. People were getting seriously involved. All this was very encouraging, exciting and heart-warming. However, prolonged over-work took its toll on my health and 1970 unfortunately became the year when calamities befell me.

Actually, I received strange warning signs near the end of the previous year. The most dramatic incident and also the one that remained most clearly in my memory was the time I had "food poisoning".

One evening, I had invited some students to dinner at my place. I did the cooking myself and took pains to prepare some delicious dishes. We had a pleasant evening and after everybody had gone home, I found myself breaking out in red spots all over. It was very itchy. I could not do much about it, so I went to bed feeling rather unwell.

In the middle of the night, I woke up with a severe pain in my chest. Although it was pitch dark and I was half asleep, my feelings were crystal clear: I am going to die! In my entire life, I never, ever had that kind of feeling before. I struggled to get up, but the pain in my chest was suffocating and I wanted to throw up. So I hurried to the bathroom to vomit. After I threw up, I felt a little better, dragged myself back to bed and dozed off.

I did not know how much time had elapsed of, but I was woken up by another spasm of chest pain. In a flash, a tenth of a second, the thought passed through my mind again: I really am going to die! I tried to get myself up again, but this time, the whole world was spinning around, even the ceiling seemed to be spinning, about to fall down. Finally, I lost control and fell to the floor. My weak murmurs for help woke up my friend.

It was the middle of the night. I was sent to the doctor who lived in the next street. The doctor's diagnosis: food poisoning. He gave me a shot and I felt better by the next day. I had cooked the food myself and none of the other people who ate with me had any problems. I was the only one who had food poisoning. This was baffling. Maybe there was something in the ingredients that did not agree with my constitution, or maybe my defence mechanism was weaker than other people's......

This incident had been rather fuzzy, but the lesson I learned from it was crystal clear. In that one tenth of a second when the thought of "death" crossed my mind, another train of thoughts passed through my head quickly too. I have no idea how one calculates the speed of thoughts, something like the speed of light, or —. I am not a scientific person, but I am one whose reflexes are fast and keen. The thought that clearly passed through my head was:

"If I were to die now, what would be most important? Even if I had a test tomorrow, or an appointment with the President, or was going to be married, it would all be rendered insignificant, because I would not be around for it. If I am to die this very second, there are only two things that are important: The first one is whether I am ready to face God; the other concerns this life — up to this point, with no more second chance — what is it worth in the eyes of God."

As far as the first is concerned, I know I can come face to face with God without fear, because I know deep down that He has saved me. As to the second criterion, my heart was a little shaky. If my life were to end at this juncture, what would my score be? 40%, 60%, 80%...... ? You can only pass through this world once, you can only walk the roads of this life once, death is your limit, your boundary. When you have reached the limit, how can you treat life lightly?

This strange experience left a deep impression in my mind and was engraved in my heart. In the days to come, it was there to challenge me, to restore me to my senses. It was there especially at times when I was depressed, or became slack and sloppy, or unfaithful to God......

My health had already been deteriorating before the food poisoning incident. That winter, I kept getting colds with coughs that would linger for months. Actually, the winter weather in Taipei was bad for my health. The entire season was one of drizzling rains and the cold damp winter wind would pierce straight through to the bone. It was not easy to take. To get bronchitis every winter was nothing new for me, but that particular winter, my respiratory system was at its lowest ebb and my defences down. I had a lot of fevers and dizzy spells.

Finally I succumbed to the counsel of my friends and went to see the doctor across the street. We had known him for some time and he was the kind of doctor who practises both western and Chinese medicine. He had a lot of experience behind him and was a kind soul. He decided that due to the poor state of my general health, I needed some pep shots. What he actually gave me was calcium — another blessing from the Lord. He hit the target. However, he did not order me to undergo any tests. (I couldn't blame him for that since he did not have my case history).

On the one hand, I was getting pep shots to bolster my health, on the other, I was working like a horse. I was not the kind of person who would slow down for the sake of my health. Anyway, I had accepted the weak state of my body and had compensated for it with faith in my own resilience. My work load was pressing and it was not easy to put it down. It so happened that at the time, a group of us who were interested in plays had put our heads together to form a drama group. We were to perform the maiden work of a friend of ours, a playwright. For several months, we worked hard together, lost in the hustle and bustle of rehearsals. On the night of the premiere performance, I hurried to

Chung Shan Hall to see the show with a 39 degree fever. My chest ached from incessant coughing but I was so excited that I jumped for joy. (Afterwards, when the doctor found out, he was very upset and scolded me: if you keep running around like this, you will end up with pneumonia).

Before I experienced my "major collapse", I had the stamina to do things like that. At the time, I did not recognise that even I had limits. The older folks who were concerned about my health watched my undaunted spirit as I went about my work. They felt a mixture of admiration, love and anger at my pace and were wracked with concern.

A major collapse of my health was to be expected sooner or later. However, I had never suspected that I would fall into such a state of decrepitude. I was used to an active life in spite of poor health. I maintained a high level of output in my work. It was very difficult for me to swallow the fact that in an instant, my ability to work had been snatched away.

From the time I fainted in the editing room, to the emergency treatment at the doctor's, followed by the time of solitude in the loft, not a single person really understood what happened. In an instant, my strength drained from me to the point that I could hardly summon enough power to speak. I remember that there was a very important phone call for me. I managed to gather enough energy to say a few words, then almost fainted again because I was so weak. After that, the auntie in charge gave orders for no more phone calls.

I was doomed to spend a period of time in solitude in the loft.

The doctor had ordered, "Complete rest. No activities except listening to music."

So a colleague hauled her old record player to my place and lots of people brought all kinds of records: classical, folk songs, popular music. Of course, there were hymns.

I listened to each record over and over again, until I could replay each tune in my head. I can still hear the music floating through the air in the loft today. When one is unable to write, not even allowed to read, music becomes extra precious.

——I am so grateful, that God gave me this ability to appreciate music.

——I am so grateful, for Bach, Beethoven, Lizst, Chopin, Debussy...... for the nun who sang so well...... for the little angels at the child-care center, for the song "No One Cares for Me Like Jesus" which often brought tears to wet my pillow...... For Joan Baez, for Peter, Paul and Mary, for those anti-war songs that make one's blood boil. They kept me in touch with the rest of the world......

I had never tasted what life is like when one lives under the condition "absolutely no activities allowed". Even in the days when I was in the hospital for operations, I would be sitting up in bed writing my diary within a few days. Now, my head would swell even if I tried to read one page of a book, and any attempt at writing were almost impossible. In fact, it was extremely painful even to try to think. The doctor said, "cerebral anemia requires complete rest." The explanation seemed logical, so I quietly complied.

The days went by, but resting did not seem to have done me any good. My head was still aching, my appetite was just as poor and I could hardly eat anything. I felt weak all over and depended on glucose drips and vitamins for my existence. Goodness knows how long I would have to rest before things would improve.

A patient's moods are volatile: as soon as one feels better, one immediately takes that as an indication of an upward turn and flicker of hope appears deep in one's heart. However, as soon as the illness takes a down turn, one falls into the bottomless pit of despair. As I lay sick in the loft, the days passed one at a time. The course of my illness was unsteady, and there seemed no improvement. The future was a veil of grey uncertainty. In such times, one's faith is tested. It is also a time to learn more lessons in life.

The loft was not situated in the midst of beautiful pine trees, neither was it in the vicinity of tides rising and ebbing by the beach. There were no sweet echoes from the pine forest, nor music from the rhythm of the waves. But at the crack of dawn, when the first ray of sunshine came through the drapes, and formed a pattern on the wall, it was sufficient to elicit a sense of appreciation for beauty and provide food for thought for the morning. In some afternoons, when I would wake up from a nap, I would hear the drops of rain falling softly on the roof, and my mind would wander back to the fading memories of the good old days. When evening came, I would sometimes catch sight of two or three homecoming birds gliding into the sunset. And I would be drawn into a cloud of sadness. At night, before I drew the curtains to go to bed, I would find myself suddenly face to face with the moon. The rays of the moon were so lucid and mesmerizing. Another evening of thoughts churning round and round.

Life is that simple when you are sick. But I could only enjoy those moments during days when I felt better. Actually, someone who has been a "borderline case" would not dare to ask too much of life itself. (The so-called "Borderline case" means one barely able to stay alive). I would count it as a blessing if I could swallow one mouthful of food. And if my system could digest that mouthful of food, that was another blessing. If I could get enough strength to take a walk in front of the house, it would be another blessing. If I could read a page of a book, or write a few words, it would be counted as a special privilege.

It is true. Anyone who has experienced being a borderline case would not dare to ask too much in life. She learns to be grateful for every small thing.

After living on the verge of death, I stepped into a new world of understanding. All the biases, stubborness, or any complaints, and ill-feelings disappeared. I no longer dared to boast about myself any more, and I never slighted anybody again. In the presence of God, all is grace. In the cauldron of suffering, we should have compassion and empathy for each other.

I had no idea that I had so many loving bonds. Get-well cards and letters came in like a snow-storm. Some were signed, some were anonymous, some from people I'd only met once, others from people I had never met. Moreover, I was aware that there were countless prayers like fragrant sacrifices placed at the throne of grace on my behalf. My name was remembered and lifted up.

Although I was lying in bed helplessly, I wanted to show a token of appreciation to these people. A desire started to burn in my heart: I want to put on paper all that has happened to me during my illness and publish it in the "Campus Magazine" for everybody to share. Finally, I did finish an article about 10,000 words long, similar in content to what is written here, but at the time, I knew very little about my case history. The essay was not particulary good prose, but both overseas and local readers were deeply affected by it. Maybe this had something to do with the conditions under which it was written.

As I lay quietly in bed, images rippled into my mind. I thought for a long time and tried to piece together all the colorful pictures in my life. I came to the final conclusion that nothing but blessings were to be found in my life, no curses. It was because of this that I entitled the essay "Only Blessings".

At the time, I was experiencing severe pain in my head. Any time I used my brain at all, the pain would increase. It took me more than ten days to write that essay. I had to pay a dear price for that. First, I would lie down and try very hard to concentrate my thoughts. After I had collected some ideas, I would struggle out of bed to put them down on paper (that really took great determination to accomplish). As I wrote, I had to hold my splitting head with my other hand. After I had finished a paragraph, I would have to go back to bed and rest for a full day. So many times my health and will would not hold out and I wanted to give up. I thought I would never be able to finish this piece of writing. The wonderful thing was there seemed to be a power propelling me, my inner world was seething like turbulent waters and I could not keep still...

Who said the formation of a pearl inside the oyster shell was not a painful process? The universe is so mysterious, but there seems to be a law governing all that happens. The article that I wrote in extreme pain and difficulty had the most unexpected consequences. The number of people who read "Blessings Only" and were moved and encouraged turned out to be countless. In one case, a letter reached me eight years after publication. It came half way round the world from the southern tip of the African continent, from the Cape of Good Hope, all the way to Taiwan. It was then forwarded from Taiwan to Hong Kong to me. It was written by a sailor on his first journey out to sea. In a moment of loneliness in the vast ocean, he had come across a copy of "Blessings Only" in the library and read it. It made him "cry all night and he could not go to sleep". So he decided to write to me. This young man was unaware of the time lapse since the article had been written. All he felt at the time was that his life needed the kind of strength that can only be generated by faith. Through the power of the written word to overcome time and space our two minds were united and we were able to encourage each other.

Anyway, all these thoughts are in retrospect. When I was confined to the loft and wrote "Blessings Only" literally with drops of sweat and blood, I had no idea what lay in store for me in the future. Lying in bed, the days passed slowly by and the cloud of uncertainty that hung over me at the time grew bigger and bigger. How much longer do I have to rest until this illness goes away? My host family had been most considerate to me. I owned them mountains of gratitude. If I were to continue like this without getting better, I would be too much of a burden for them!

While my body and soul were being thus tried, I dare not say I kept a steady faith, or was constantly singing songs of praise and victory. I griped, I doubted, I felt that God was far away. No, I was not a mighty eagle, who, in any kind of weather, under any circumstances, . could still soar to the heights and glide and whistle in the wind. When the clouds hung low and darkness covered all, I curled up and lay still and would not take a step forward. I could not imagine that behind the clouds, the sun still shone brightly. When my eyes were filled with tears, I could not see beyond the dark clouds to the silver lining.......

It was in those days that the hymn written by the Englishman John Henry Newman (1810–1890) called "Lead, Kindly Light" kept repeating in my mind, bringing me a message of comfort:

Lead, kindly light,
amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on;
The night is dark,
and I am far from home,

Lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
The distant scene;
One step enough for me.

"The next step" seemed most likely to be convalescence for another few months — I could not see further ahead. But faith says: This is enough.

In some evenings, when I felt a little stronger, I would leave the house and wander along the narrow paths. I would be overjoyed to see my long-lost companion — the big bright "Evening Star" hanging in the dim light of dusk. She had been my companion since my early childhood. We have a long lasting friendship. There were countless evenings that I would watch for her to appear, then to disappear. We had exchanged so many wordless thoughts. After I grew up, life became busy and I had such a heavy schedule that we met much less frequently. But every time I had a crisis, or when my faith began to falter, or when I began to give up hope, she would appear. She is the "Star of Hope" in my life.

In my solitary days in the loft, I was fortunate to have the Star of Hope to shine on me.

Blessings Only?

"In my life, there is no curse, only blessings."

Ping Hsin

It had been more than two months since I moved to the loft, and I was not getting better. My host and hostess were getting anxious. They began talking to me about consulting a specialist.

"When you need to consult a specialist, make sure you see an endocrinologist." My brother's advice came back to me.

It took us quite some time before we could locate a group of specialists in a clinic which included an endocrinologist. (It seems few doctors choose this specialty.)

So began the second round of my illness.

The specialist asked me a few simple questions, and then went right to the point and asked me, "Do you know that you are a cancer patient?"

I was taken aback. For a minute, I did not know what to say.

"The operation you had a few years ago was to remove a cancerous tumour."

"How did you know?" I asked in a halting voice.

"You family wrote and told Mr. and Mrs. Chang," the specialist continued calmly.

What happened was that when my parents saw little sign of recuperation, and not knowing exactly what was happening here, they suspected that the cancer might be returning. So in a moment of panic, they decided to tell

Uncle and Auntie Chang the truth.

When I heard the news, I was not particularly disturbed. Maybe I was so frail at the time that my reactions were a little slow.

The specialist took my history and asked some questions about the last few months.

"It seems to me that since your parathyroid glands have been removed, you have been given calcium and vitamin D supplements. You probably know that the parathyroid glands control the calcium level in the blood. The delicate balance of calcium in the body is very important. It appears to me that you have a calcium imbalance in your blood. However, I need to do some tests, and then we will see."

He paused for a moment, then added,

"Patients like you are very fragile at this stage. You should not allow yourself to be disturbed. If anything happens, it would be extremely dangerous—."

I looked at him, stunned, and gulped down a mouthful of cold air.

The test results came back quickly. It was as expected — the calcium level in the blood was too low. The specialist changed the dosage of my medication. He did some other tests too at the time and there seemed to be no problems, so I felt relieved.

I had hoped that after this, I would be on the road to recovery. But strangely enough, as the days passed, my blood calcium remained low. I still felt very weak and did not have much strength.

The specialist said, "Be patient. It takes time to correct the imbalance."

However, at that very time, another specialist came on the scene and stirred up a new drama.

He's a good friend who also happened to be a doctor. He had received his medical education from a well-known medical school in the United States. He was doing research in physiology and had just returned to Taiwan for vacation. He saw that I was not getting any better and was getting impatient about it. So he devised this great plan to guarantee an increase in my blood calcium within a short time. He suggested that we should use bones to make broth, and then add the calcium pills to it. I did as instructed.

At the time, I was taking a calcium dose three times that of normal. With the stimulation of the bone broth, my blood calcium really shot up. Alas, what we did not foresee was that once it shot up, the consequences went out of control and led to tragic ends.

In the first few days, I did feel better all of a sudden. Just as I was congratulating myself on the success, I found myself vomiting for no particular reason. The vomiting occurred mostly in the mornings and it kept getting worse. I felt I was throwing up my whole stomach and I could not eat anything. It was most disconcerting.

Those days were a nightmare. I am not clear at all as to what happened. I only remember a day when the vomiting was specially severe, so much so that I could not eat all day. My whole body seemed as if it did not belong to me. When evening came and Auntie saw that things were not quite right, she started to panic. After talking it over with Uncle, they decided to ask the doctor that we knew to come over to take a look at me. The doctor was very obliging, he broke his rule and came for a house call after dark.

I remember the doctor took my pulse and then frowned. After reading my blood pressure, his face screwed up and he took it once again. Then the corners of his mouth twitched as he put down the sphygmomanometer with trembling hands. He turned to Auntie and said in an alarmed low voice,

"Take her to the hospital......take her to the hospital...... "

I never found out how high my blood pressure registered at that time, but I can imagine it must have been pretty alarming.

In his helpless state, the doctor gave me a shot — probably saline or glucose, just to give me a lift. Or maybe it was a sedative. Anyway, I passed the night peacefully.

Early next morning, Auntie immediately sent me to see another doctor to arrange for me to check into a hospital.

The nurses in the hospital were just as surprised as the doctor — though after the shot, my blood pressure should not have been as high as it was the night before. However, a blood pressure reading of 180 was enough to make anyone worry. Even more so when the patient was young and frail, with a complexion that bordered on yellow and green and gave no hint of high blood pressure.

"Why don't you take it once more. Maybe my reading was not accurate." The nurse gave her companion a nudge. She glanced at me and then at the sphygmomanometer.

The other nurse went through the motions once more and got the same reading. When I was at the doctor this morning, it was only 140. So my blood pressure had jumped 40 degrees in a few hours. It must have been over 200 the night before...... Only three months ago I had fainted due to low blood pressure. After resting for three months, just as I thought I was recovering, I was sent to the hospital because of high blood pressure......

Who knows what is happening to my body chemistry?

This time it could not be low blood calcium. Maybe there was too much calcium in my blood.

The blood test confirmed that this was the case.

What happened next I cannot recall. The whole scene was one of total confusion, like the chaos of darkness before the creation of the universe.

In the midst of the chaos, I made one clear decision. I made up my mind to return to my family in Hong Kong to convalesce and not bother Uncle and Auntie Chang any more. It so happened that a letter came from home to say that a friend would be visiting Taiwan soon and would be able to accompany me back.

The day I left the hospital I caught the flu. I was running a fever coupled with a stomach infection. So, other than rice soup, I could not eat anything at all. My already frail condition worsened. The calcium imbalance was still there and I was throwing up all day. My whole body just did not feel well. Those days were not easy to bear. On top of that, I had to pack to go back to Hong Kong.

Just days before I left for Hong Kong, a few of my closest friends came to say good-bye. I managed a smile and said to them, "I am going to curse the day of my birth like Job!" It was a good thing that my friends were not "Job's friends". They conveyed their boundless sympathy either through their silence or in a few simple words. Their acts of empathy comforted me, encouraged me and moistened my heart which was parched with impatience.

Only a month ago I had unabashedly published my essay, "Blessings Only". Immediately, my faith faced new tests and challenges. At the time, I did not know that there would be even greater tests and challenges to come.

Before I boarded the plane, the doctor had made some special arrangements for me. He had asked the airline to provide a wheel-chair for me which took me all the way up to the plane, because I was not able to eat and had no strength to walk. I was relying solely on the shots the doctor gave me. The intravenous feedings gave me the nutrients I needed and my complexion improved. When I was seated in the wheel-chair, I looked as if I was healthy and full of vigor. I never cease to be amazed at those miraculous "shots" the doctor gave me.

I arrived at Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport in the wheel-chair. My family was there to welcome me, their faces a mixture of anxiety and relief. When we arrived at our door-step, they put me in the big rattan chair they had prepared for me. Two willing and strong friends hoisted me all the way up to the fourth floor.

All these real-life happenings were more dramatic than a stage drama. Unfortunately, the excitement was too much for my already weakened condition and this made things even worse. When I came to think about it later, I realized I was in a very precarious state. No one knew what they were supposed to do if anything happened. My family had made an appointment with a well-known internist, but he was away on vacation and was not due back for another couple of days. When the effects of those "miracle shots" wore off, I came tumbling down.

By the time my family got me to the hospital, nothing was registering right in my body. The calcium level in my blood was unbelievably high, my blood pressure was as high as 200 or more, and then my heart, kidney and blood chemistry were all abnormal. Soon, I fell into a semi-coma. For several days and nights, I drifted in and out of a black and bottomless pit....... My family watched me toss and turn in agony, listened to my groans, my mutterings in my sleep. An icy cold fear passed through them and they did not know whether I was to wake up again or not.

Alas, at the crossroads of life and death, it is often the loved ones that suffer, not the sick. Those loved ones have to sit and watch helplessly as the invalid struggles between life and death.

However, I did roll back from the verge of death. My health was still extremely poor and unstable, but I was out of danger.

Under the careful supervision of the skillful internist, my health improved and calcium level slowly came back to normal.

I still remember the first time I was allowed to eat steamed rice again. It had been a long time since I tasted cooked rice, in fact, a long time since I entertained the sensation of chewing food. When I held in my hands that little bowl of beef rice which my mother had specially prepared for me, the taste was just heavenly. Feelings of thanksgiving and blessedness almost choked me.

At a point when my health was finally improving, the doctor brought us another piece of news. On the X-rays of my lungs, he had discovered some unexplained shadows. This piece of news bothered me somewhat, but my appetite continued to improve and my body was getting stronger, so I did not take much note of it.

A few days later, I was woken from my sweet dreams. My doctor had brought along a surgeon to examine me.

"I would like Dr. X to examine the lymph glands around your neck, the same area that I examined a few days ago."

The surgeon quickly went over the lymph glands with practised motions and nodded to my doctor.

"We have discovered one or two swollen lymph glands and would like to perform a small operation — a very tiny job — to take some tissues for examination, to see if it has anything to do with the shadows in your lung—" my doctor said without looking me in the eye. Although he tried to smile, he could not shield his awkwardness.

I was stunned.

When I was in Taipei under the care of the endocrinologist, I had asked him to do a thorough check-up. "Doctor, my friends advise me to go to the Veteran's Hospital to do a complete physical, to see if it is the cancer returning, because there seems to be a lot of strange symptoms...... "

"I have already told you that these are symptoms of calcium imbalance. Once we stabilise the amount of calcium in your blood, the symptoms will disappear." The specialist then paused and added, "If it makes you feel better, I can arrange for you to go into the hospital for the tests. It is going to be difficult to find a bed for you there. We can try. I will write you a note—"

As he was writing the note, the specialist said:

"The problem is that if you want to be tested for cancer, you need to stop taking the medications for your thyroid glands. At your present state of health, it may not be a good idea. The way I see it, there is no fear of the cancer recurring at the present moment."

"If you think the chances are not so great, may be I should not go for the tests. Actually, I am not so worried, it's just some friends —" Then I added a question, "What are the symptoms of recurring cancer?"

"Swollen lymph glands—" The specialist stopped writing and tore up his note.

Those words are still fresh in my memory. My attending physician just told me that my lymph glands were swollen. I stared at him, totally taken aback.

"It may not be anything serious," my own doctor quickly added, "it's just that we have not done any tests for so many years now, it's about time we do a thorough check-up. That is normal procedure."

I gave my hair a toss and forced a brave smile.

"O.K." — my heart had cooled down considerably.

"We are not in a hurry. We will wait till your calcium balance is under control before we do anything." Then my doctor added, "From today on, we are going to stop your thyroid medications because after a while, we need to do a special radioscopy test."

"Stop the thyroid medications, do a special test. That has to be looking for the possibility of cancer." My reaction was fast.

"There is only one chance in a million. There are a lot of other possibilities." My doctor pulled out all the stops from his bedside experience to comfort me.

And so began the third round of my illness. Once this began, it made the first two rounds pale in comparison.

The desire to sleep eluded me. I lay in bed quietly, pondering. If I die, what kind of funeral service should I have? — I would like it to be simple, but dignified. I would like to be buried beside my little sister — if that is possible at all.

Whatever happens, I would like to be in that park, where the ocean merges with the heavens. That was my favorite wandering ground as a little girl.

The only question that remained was what to do with my "possessions" — my diary and letters. Should I burn them or leave them behind?

My parents brought me dinner. I took a few bites, then I had a choking sensation. I made myself eat two more mouthfuls, and I had to put it down.

"How come you lost your appetite? You were eating quite well a few days ago." My mother's eyes were sharp.

"Today they stopped the thyroid medications. Maybe it affected my appetite. The doctor said he needed to do a test." I dared not tell them straight out about the minor operation.

"How could the reaction to the withdrawal of thyroid medications be so fast! You just stopped it and it has affected your appetite already...... " My mother's eyes showed her doubt.

I mumbled something.

When they left, my eyes lingered on their backs. (Maybe there won't be many more times!)

In the early evening, one of my younger sisters came to say goodbye. She was leaving to study overseas. We went for a walk in the little garden. We sat under some small bamboo trees and prayed.

She cried. I did not shed tears, but in my heart, I said, "Goodbye. We will meet again in our Heavenly home."

When night came, I took out my writing folder and wrote a letter to my bosom friends in Taipei.

(I had to get these things done immediately. Otherwise, when the illness takes a down turn, it would be too late for me to say all the things I wanted to say.)

"My one and only wish," I wrote, "is this: Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. (Philippians 1:20)."

(When they read my letter, they were greatly alarmed and thought my life would end any day.)

That night, I could not sleep at all. My whole being seemed to be afloat in a timeless "time-frame" and "space". My mind seemed blank, but I was tossing to and fro. Then perhaps I was thinking, but there was no trace of a thought anywhere.

The fear of cancer had seeped through to every one of my cells, both conscious and subconscious.

I tried to analyse what it was that I was afraid of.

I know I am not afraid of death: although I have no "accomplishments" to speak of, I have contributed all that I have and lived a full and meaningful life.

I know I am not afraid of death: because I am a forgiven sinner who has received salvation. To me, death does not lead to somewhere unknown. It is moving to a better, brighter place, where I have more of myself to surrender.

Then, what am I afraid of?

—The road that leads to death: that valley of death, that ice-cold river.

—The suffering before death: the deterioration of the body, the pain of inner struggles, the agony of waiting......

—The afflictions brought on by treatment and the subsequent inconveniences involved.

—The distress of my family and all the trouble I cause them.

—All the thoughts connected with cancer......

After all, I am human. I have my weaknesses.

The calcium level in my blood took a long time to drop, so the operation had to be postponed. I also had to wait my turn to take those special tests. But my health was improving day by day.

Suspended in the midst of these ominous vexations, I spent the quiet days in the hospital learning some new lessons I had never learned before.

Of course, even though life in the hospital may appear to be serene on the surface, it is filled with uncertainties, restlessness and all kinds of tragedies. In the room across from me lived a middle-aged man. He was in the final stages of cancer of the liver and was put on morphine to keep the pain down. Maybe all the other pain-killers didn't help him any more, or maybe there were other reasons, but the doctor had instructed the nurses not to give him more than a certain dosage. The poor patient, in his moments of extreme agony, would.follow the nurses around to beg for another shot. The nurses all tried to avoid him, some would coax him a bit, others would tell him off. None could grant him his request. All these years, I cannot get rid of that tragic scene: the blood-shot eyes, the twitching face, the sad implorings, the hopeless trailing around......

This is life in the hospital. A hospital is not a place where one finds birds singing and flowers blooming. The hospital is saturated with hidden crises, time bombs, tragic scenes not fit for the eye, happenings that wring one's heart with aches and tears.

On one of the nights I was waiting for the truth to be revealed, I accidently broke a glass on my bedside table. The floor was littered with shattered glass.

An orderly in white top and black trousers came in and silently picked up all the pieces.

"Here, just a little bit, this is for you." I stuffed a $5 tip into her hand. (At the time, there was no Anti-Corruption Commission, most hospitals allowed a little bit of tipping.)

"No," she gently pushed my hand away, "I don't know you yet and I have not done anything for you, I shouldn't take this money."

Her eyes then rested on the Bible beside my bed.

"You are a believer?"

I nodded. "You too?" We thus began our conversation.

"Miss, God has shown such great mercies to me. My feet were healed by Him. The doctors said there was no hope. I lay in the hospital and could not move at all. The only thing I could do was pray. The brothers and sisters from church prayed for me too. Then I was unconscious for three days. When I woke up, I was healed. There was no need for an operation. When I fell into the coma, it was like someone had given me an anesthetic...... " She got more and more excited as she spoke.

"I am in my sixties now and I am still very healthy." It hadn't occured to me that she was that old. I took a closer look and discovered quite a few lines in the corners of her eyes. She did squint which suggests poor eye-sight. But her skin texture was beautifully smooth. "Whatever I do, I do it for God. I run back and forth each day, but I don't feel tired. I am on night duty. I sleep a few hours in the day, and then the rest of the time I spend on the Lord's work. I have had very little schooling. I cannot do great things. But I pray for the patients each day. God hears my prayers. Whenever I am on duty in the room, the patient always sleeps peacefully that night."

"Miss, shall we pray together?" She closed the door tightly behind her, drew close to my bed and stood there offering supplications on my behalf.

In the dim light, only the shadow of this white-top and black-trousers can be seen standing beside my bed praying for my illness. What a beautiful sight. For the next few nights whenever I turned off the light, the feeling of her presence remained fresh in my mind. I deeply believe it is easier for those with simple faith such as this old lady's to reach the Throne of Grace.

I also deeply believe this old lady made definite contributions to the patients — especially to the poor and suffering. All those so-called "educated elite" have plenty to boast of: science, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology etc. They could talk to their hearts' content. But when they are riddled with illness, when the body and the spirit are at a low ebb, all the talk becomes emptiness. What sick people need to know and experience is a God who reaches out for them, a loving heavenly Father, a God who will listen to their prayers any time and comfort them and have the power to heal them.

When I got the "hints" from the doctor that the chances of cancer were increasing, I found myself empowered with courage to stand up to face the issue:

Is cancer really that terrible? It cannot be worse than war, riots or the hijacking of a plane. It cannot be as terrible as a merciless murder, ruthless torture, senseless killing, brain-washing......

Is the road to death that terrifying? Many saints have walked through that path with faith before me. Couldn't I sing with David, the psalmist, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

That hymn I learnt as a child in Sunday school all of a sudden became very precious:

"E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Still God through Jordan leadeth me,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me."

If I still harbor fear, it must be due to the fact I do not know God's love thoroughly. As the "beloved disciple" John wrote:

> "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him...... There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out all fear...... "
>
> I John 4:16–18

Of course, we do not see God with our eyes or touch Him with our hands. His love is expressed through the body of believers. Letters came to me from all over the world:

"Collegues and students in Taiwan are praying earnestly for you."

"Our brothers and sisters in Los Angeles are ceaselessly remembering you in prayer."

"In Singapore, the different fellowhips have been praying for you, among them people you don't even know—"

In Canada, in the Philippines, as far away as New Zealand......

Each day, endless supplications have been made on my behalf to the Throne (Just the thought of this was enough to warm my entire being). With so many people praying for me, I can anticipate all kinds of miracles to happen. With so many, so many people uplifting me, there is nothing to fear — anything that happens will not be that terrible.

After the initial shock, I came face to face with death and its passive longing for it. In an unsettling world such as this, where humanity is going down the drain, and with a weak physique like mine, death is not altogether an unwelcome intrusion. Besides, death can solve a lot of the problems I do not want to face.

But whenever this thought comes to me, I feel ashamed. I know that as long as I allow this kind of thinking to envelop me, death will not come. Because that is being disloyal to life.

I have no idea when the moment of death will arrive. Maybe not until the day I cry from the depths of my soul: I want to continue to live! To live for God, to live for those who love me. Although it means hardship, pain and suffering and all sorts of torments, I am willing to take the test and look the challenge in the eye.

(Oh! Let us not ask too many questions or probe the source or origin of sufferings, that is beyond our reach. Rather, let us learn from the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. What we need is courage to look suffering in the eye, endurance to withstand the forces of affliction. We need to take refuge and encouragement from suffering and harvest from it the fruits of goodness.)

The minor operation took place, but before the results came, it was my turn to take the special test.

That was a test involving radioisotopes. At the time, it was one of the newest technological breakthroughs and it was supposed to be the most accurate test for cancer. There were only a few places in the whole of Hong Kong with the necessary equipment. In fact, the hospital where I was staying did not have such equipment, so I had to transfer to the Government hospital where I had stayed before. This was the first time I returned to that hospital after I left Hong Kong. The doctor who attended to me in the radiotherapy department had by then risen through the ranks to the position of specialist.

The test took three days. After the third day, I asked the technician gingerly, "We should know the results today." She hesitated, "Almost ready. When you see the doctor, he will explain it all to you." Then she added in a kinder tone, "How do you feel? Any discomfort?"

From her tone of voice, I guessed the results.

"Doctor, I would like to know the test results." I was surprised at my calmness.

"Well...... well...... " the radiotherapist replied slowly, "We have this situation......; But fortunately, your cancer is growing at a very slow rate, and at this stage, your body can still absorb iodine. It probably has been a few years since the cancer invaded the lungs, but as long as we can control it, and keep it from spreading to other areas, you should be able to live for a long time. Eight years, ten years, or maybe more......who knows......?"

He continued, "Your kind of cancer is the most benign of all cancers of the thyroid glands."

Then he paused, and his face twisted into an expression of mixed sobriety and jest, added, "If I had to contract cancer, I would pick your variety."

The results from the biopsy came. The tissues of the lymph glands showed "positive" results. The facts were before me. The past diagnoses had not been wrong. The recent diagnosis had plenty of evidence to support it. There was no mistake.

That was the Fall of 1970. I was diagnosed as having recurrent cancer which had spread to my lungs. It was at this time that the truth was laid bare before me. For the first time in my life, I had access to my entire medical history and could hold the complete situation in my own hands. By the end of the year, I had recovered slowly from my very weak health. Although my calcium level was not totally balanced, my "major collapse" had come to an end.

The most difficult thing for me to accept was that the recurrent cancer was discovered purely by accident. It had nothing to do with my "major collapse". The collapse of my health was not due to cancer itself. In fact, it was the unrelenting consequence of the fight against cancer I waged a few years ago.

Is this the pride of modern science? Or is it a tragedy? I do not know. All I know is that I was redeemed from death, only to face even more terrifying afflictions day by day.

I have never really tasted the sufferings brought on by "cancer", but I know full well the encumbrance of "treatments" for cancer. These agonies grow with the days and years and would hardly be understood by the general public (I will elaborate on this in the next chapter). While everybody talks about "cancer" with trepidation, I shudder at the thought of "calcium". Radiotherapy indeed helped kill a lot of my cancer cells, but it also destroyed many of the normal healthy cells in my body.

How can I express the feelings of one who has to be kept alive by medications for the rest of her years?

At the time of my "major collapse", I wrote an essay entitled "Blessings Only." After I received the news that my cancer had recurred, I wrote a sequel, "Blessings Furthermore." I got the inspiration from Ping Hsin*, from one of the lines she wrote: "In my life, there are only 'blossoms' and 'light' and 'love'; in my life, there are blessings only, no imprecation."

It was not difficult for Ping Hsin to write thus at that period of history and at the tender age of twenty. She had scarcely experienced any hardship in the world. But the "Blessings Only" I wrote at the time of my "major collapse", when I had gone through agonies of soul and body, was in no way a simple romantic expression. When I say something like this, I know on what grounds I am making such declarations. An ancient Hebrew poet wrote of his experience in this world,"I say this because I have faith." Apostle Paul, the old soldier of life, took the poet's words and boldly added his emphasis, "We also believe, so we also speak." At the time, I echoed them in a tiny whisper, "I also believe, so I also speak."

No matter how one looks at it, at the time of my "major collapse", there was an inkling of romance. On the one hand, I was showered with lots of love, completely enveloped in care and concern. There were countless flowers, get-well cards, little poems, notes......I really experienced the blessing of the body of believers. On the other hand, all along I felt that I might not be living long, so at the height of the events, even suffering had been transformed into blessings.

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*a famous Chinese woman author(1900—)

To die is not onerous, to go on living is far from easy. Today, after ten years, after living through all those hardships, with even more troubles ahead to conquer, when I need to write these words again, I need to surpass my own faith.

Today, I am still willing to count my blessings with faith. But today, I am ready to make a few amendments. My life is not only full of blessings, I am also living under a curse. I am strongly convinced that I am living under a curse. But this kind of curse is not mine alone, it is a bondage shared by the whole of mankind. All mankind is hurting and groaning under the curse of sin. The manifestations of sin are exemplified without reservation in physical, psychological and daily activities. Its menacing powers stretch like tentacles to every corner of the world. I am but one of the millions who are crying out in agony under this cauldron of suffering.

Alas, it is not for us to eliminate the source of suffering in this life. All I can hold on to is the faith that surpasses suffering, the faith that overcomes anguish.

Hovering Between Normalcy And Abnormality

But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

II Cor. 12:9

Towards the end of 1970, I was on the way to recovery from my battle with illness. My infirmity fresh behind me, I made my way to Singapore to revel in some sunshine. At the same time, I was to audit some classes in one of the seminaries and do some research myself. The notion came as an invitation from the President of the seminary. My doctor said, "That's not a bad idea. Otherwise your body may have a hard time getting through the cold winter here."

The fresh air and sunshine in Singapore really did the trick. Within a few months, I had gained ten pounds. But what I did not expect was that I would find myself pioneering a magazine there.

Actually, the idea came from a group of graduate and undergraduate students from the Nan Yang University. They had elected me chief editor because of my experience.

The first issue of Sentinel magazine was not monumental, but it had its moving pages. In the inaugural issue, we wrote:

"...... We feel we have this heavy sense of mission — to our generation, to our society. We know the greatest need in the human heart is a direction, an altar for sacrifice, a goal that will summon the sacrifice of all regardless of cost. ...... Today, thousands upon thousands of Asian youths are standing at the gateway of life, bursting with energy, waiting, and watching the turmoil in the outside world with impatience and expectancy. They want to proceed, but hesitate to go forward. They grope in the dark and yet cannot find their direction. They want to rush forward, and yet do not know the direction. They want to rush forward, and yet do not know where the destination lies. Here, we gingerly, but with whole-hearted sincerity, (because of the experiences of our lives urging us on) try to point the way to the meaning of life, to faith, and to evaluate and fathom the ideal ...... We boldly take up the responsibility of being the sentinels. We stand at the watch tower and will not slacken even for a minute. We stand at the front lines, ready to make any necessary sacrifices ...... "

Those were really days of blazing enthusiasm—

At the time, Nan Yang University had not been closed, its humanistic and national ideals were not yet dead. Yun Nan Garden was still in full swing. There was no distance between me and the Nan Yang students either in thought or in feelings. The descendents of Emperors Yen and Huang* are indeed deeply bound together by their common cultural roots. Moreover, we are further linked together in our faith.

All in all, I ended up spending a considerable span of time living on the campus of Nan Yang University. I had spent endless dawns and twilights walking in the Yun Nan Garden. My foot prints were all over Chung King Road, the Path of Scholars, Nan Yang Bay. Even in my dreams today

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*It is said that Chinese people are descendents of Yen Ti and Huang Ti, two of the earliest rulers of China.(Translator)

I can see the intricate details of the lovebird's tree, the charming bougainvilleas. I was only in Singapore for about two years, but I established some life-long friendships there.

I served as editor for "Sentinel" for a few issues and then I left Singapore. "Sentinel" did not have enough support, either financially or in terms of personnel and planning. We were relying on our enthusiasm, but we did not have sufficient understanding of mass communication. It was not enough especially when we were so inexperienced. After I left, "Sentinel" continued for a few more issues and then met with some serious problems. Toward the end, it was kept alive for a while with barely any strength in it. Actually, the political climate of Singapore was not conducive for something like "Sentinel" to germinate and bloom. However, "Sentinel" symbolized a very precious dream.

What was the condition of my health while we were preparing to publish "Sentinel"? It was true that at the beginning of my convalescence, the sunshine and fresh air in Singapore had added ten pounds to my weight. But as soon as the research started and I was writing, I was wrapped up in a very busy schedule, and my body weight began to decline.

A very busy schedule was not good for my health. For the sake of containing the cancer, the doctor had prescribed a fairly heavy dosage of thyroid medication. It made my thyroid glands overly active in some ways and put my whole being in an unstable condition. Some of the observable symptoms were palpitations of the heart, shivering and sweating. The most distracting side-effect was the increased rate of metabolism. I had to eat something every two to three hours, otherwise I could not function. So everywhere I went, I had to carry in my bag a snack such as a piece of cake or chocolate. For the sake of keeping this overly active thyroid in check, the doctor had allowed me to take a fairly heavy amount of tranquilizer. That was the only way I could maintain a normal life style. Even with the help of the tranquilizers, there were times when I was walking that I would feel a sudden increase in heart beat without warning, the whole world would turn upside down and I would almost faint.

No wonder all those who knew me would marvel at the busy schedule I kept in spite of my failing health. I am going to let a fellow warrior from "Sentinel" say a few words on my behalf here. In a farewell essay, he wrote,

"...... Although she is frail, she takes up more of the responsibility than any of us. Although her style is gentle, she abides by stringent rules when looking at things. In this way, she stands firm in her faith. She is gracefully quiet, yet profound and abstruse. She speaks softly, yet her pen is so sharp that she can command an entire army. She is supposed to be a "part-time" officer, yet she takes up a full load that exacts from her more energy than she has: committee meetings, counselling, Bible studies, chairing of meetings, and on top of that, school work, writing. Finally, when "Sentinel" was published, she was the one who ran back and forth to the printers, bargained with them about prices, got the design ready, got the manuscripts in, edited, proof-read..... Sometimes during the day, if she only had a "fast food service" which consists of a few crackers and a glass of water, her body would not function. She would sometimes get so tired that she had to rest her head on her hand in order to continue working ...... "

When I left Singapore, I lost ten pounds, so I was back to where I started. I had to leave eventually because of immigration restrictions. But at the time, too much exertion had had a bad effect on my health and it was time for me to return to Hong Kong to recuperate.

I arrived back in Hong Kong at the end of '72 and finally settled down there.

That winter was not particularly severe, but I found myself shivering in layers of heavy clothing. Life was monotonous when poor health exercised its constraints. I could not be considered a sick person' because I was taking part in the activities of a healthy person. On the other hand, I could not be considered 'well' because there were a lot of abnormal things about me. However, my daily schedule was fairly light and easy. I spent most of my time at home and tasted the luxury of the unemployed for the first time in my life. Apart from editing some translations, I did not have any work. I did not know what lay ahead, what kind of circuitous paths needed to be tackled, or what mountains needed to be climbed. I only felt that life had come to a stop. I felt weak and there were a lot of restrictions. There wasn't much I could do any more.

However, challenges kept hurtling at me from all directions and did not allow me to laze around for long. In the early '70s, society in Hong Kong was going through some rapid changes. The crime rate accelerated and the problems with young people were enough to scare any one. Having lived away from Hong Kong for a few years, my reactions were specially intense. In an open letter to a friend in Singapore, I wrote,

"This city is growing too fast. There are too many changes. The only thing that has not changed is the sky— in early winter this year, the sky was just as blue, the white clouds floated just as far away. Apart from this, even the ocean had changed (many bays had been filled as reclaimed land). The colors of the mountains had changed (many once green peaks had been razed to the ground). But the greatest change is in our society, our young people!

On a sunny morning, I would stroll around our roof-top. There, I could catch a glimpse of the 'knoll' in between the tall high-rise buildings. How my heart ached to go to the 'knoll' (the little hill behind my home is full of my foot-prints from childhood days). How lonely it must have been for the knoll! Unfortunately, people in Hong Kong, in suffocating living conditions, would not dare to go to the little hill for a breath of fresh air (Last month, a mother and child had gone to the reservoir area for an early morning walk and were murdered by thieves). We keep ourselves behind tightly bolted iron gates. When some one rings the door bell, we check carefully first by looking at the caller from the 'peephole'. We dare not trust our fellow human beings any more. When we enter an elevator, we are constantly watching out for any who might suddenly put a coil round our neck, and then rob us of everything (the ruthless gang of neck-chokers have cast a dark shadow over all our lives). We keep ourselves alert and ready for sudden attack whether by day or by night, if we are walking in a secluded area. If and when the cool blade touches the body, and the amount of cash we are carrying is "not satisfactory", the knife is merciless, so is the knife wielder.

Our high school students are living under the threat of being 'kicked into a gang'. They could be surrounded and killed in a pool of blood on their way home from school. Brute force, the diminished value of life, the distortion of humanity has reached the limit.

What disturbs me most is that the majority of crimes are commited by youths under twenty-one. These are our own young people! (Whose responsibility is that?)

And in our church, we attend regular meetings week after week, our members are all law-abiding middle-class people —

(At present, the only exciting challenge for me is the small group of Christians who are starting some pioneering work in Kowloon Walled City. I hope one day I will be able to write about the heart-warming happenings in that "forbidden city").

On sunny days, I still walk around the roof-top. Every time I think about the blood-curdling crimes committed in this city by the minute, my heart aches. I weep for my own hometown.

'Oh God, what can I do for this city?' — all I have is a frail body, and my pen. I have never felt so utterly depressed about the sins and crimes of this world, I have never felt so drastically inadequate."

'What can I do for this city?' — I never thought this feeble cry was to become an explosive seed. In the days to come, it germinated into the 'Breakthrough' movement.

The story of 'Breakthrough' is not within the framework of this book. However, from the point of view of that movement as a legend, or a dramatic event, one would find a close parallel in the course of events in this book.

My unexpected meeting with Dr. C, another founder of the 'Breakthrough' movement, took place at this time — it was late at night in the cold, chilly midwinter in Kowloon Walled City. At the time, he had just returned from medical studies in Canada and was working in a hospital. Both of us cherished an impassioned burning burden for this city, but neither of us had crystallized any solid plans or objectives at the time.

The spring of '73 must have been a very special spring. It not only brought vitality to all living things of the land, it also brought 'Breakthrough' to the community of Hong Kong.

This unexpected opportunity proved to be the impetus for a small band of Christians to convene. Some had just returned from overseas studies, some had been working on the local scene for a while. They shared an ideal, they held a common philosophy of life. Furthermore, they shared a concern for youth in Hong Kong. They had this strange aspiration to institute a magazine for the young people. This magazine was to be different from anything that was currently available on the market, yet they wanted the magazine to earn a place in the newstand amongst the numerous publications. This publication would not have photos of actors and singers on its covers to entice readers. Nor would it rely on the reporting of the private lives of actors and actresses, or astrology or fashion to draw the crowd. At the same time, it had to fulfill the needs of young people and fill the emptiness within their souls. The magazine was to be the conscience of society, the voice of the prophet, a pillar that stands firm amid adversities, the bell in the morning and the drum in the evening .... They planned to print 20,000 copies for each of the beginning issues. The projected cost in the first year would be about HK$250,000...... Under the circumstances at the time, this group of people could only have been dreaming!

But in January, 1974, 'Breakthrough' magazine came into being. The dream had become a reality.

A nineteen year-old sixth form student reacted like this: "Breakthrough! It is almost a tearful cry. When I first heard the name Breakthrough I knew it was the battle cry of many, many prayers."

I wrote an editorial in 'Breakthrough: Words to provoke thought' presenting this challenge: "What is it that we are breaking through? Let us lay it out in the open: we want to break through the chains of sin, the ugliness of the present circumstances, the darkness without hope, and — the pressure and temptations of materialism."

It was not easy for me to finally accept the post of chief editor of "Breakthrough". Although I had been chief editor for two other magazines previously, "Breakthrough" was the first one that could be considered in the realm of public communications. It was not just a magazine, it was an all-out movement. We had to do detailed analysis of the market and in-depth research. Furthermore, we had to compete in the open market with other publications. So we had to try to run this more in the framework of a business enterprise. On the other hand, we had no "financial backers". All we had was "faith" which the world found hard to accept. On top of this, we had to mobilize many, many volunteers. They constituted the editorial committee, the design committee, the research committee, a committee for news coverage, for business and for counselling ...... At the time, there were just myself and Dr. C working on a part-time basis and another full-time assistant. The rest of the two hundred workers were all volunteers and it was up to the three of us to provide the driving force to propell the movement.

No matter how one thinks about it, those were impossible tasks. In 1973, I was half a sick person and I lacked the faith to do great things. I did not have the courage to take up the load of a normal job. So I agreed to work part-time and received a half salary. I started officially in July of 1973 and began to propagate the vision of "Breakthrough". By the middle of December, we had printed 20,000 copies of the inaugural issue and we started the wheel turning for the following issues. I do not remember how long I was on half-pay. I only remember that I did the work of three people. Things like writing, editing and proof-reading were done in the middle of the night while design and pasting were done with the design committee on week-ends through the nights. Day time was taken up with advertisements, public relations and dealing with the printers. Evenings were often spent in meetings with the volunteers.

No wonder an old hand in the publishing world said to me half jokingly, "Everytime you take a break to recuperate from illness, a new magazine comes into being."

"Breakthrough" came into being and the enthusiastic response from the public far exceeded our expectations. A storm of orders came in. Readers wrote letters of encouragement, the radio interviewed us, the newspapers and other groups rallied their support for us. It was just so exciting. The advancement of "Breakthrough" was so rapid that it was almost exponential. Soon we began a counselling service, soon we began broadcasting in the commercial radio a magazine on-the-air program for listeners, soon we started readers' camps and Breakthrough Nights.* Soon we changed from a bi-monthly to a monthly magazine. All these things happened within two years. "Breakthrough" had changed from a mere magazine to a multi-facet communications movement for youth.

I have no idea when I switched from part-time to full-time status. By full-time, I mean super-time. Those were the days when I would regularly work for 12 to 13 hours a day. The work load increased daily and there was always more that needed to be done.

This was not all. During the same period, I got involved in another whirlpool: I started to take an interest in drama. Apart from writing plays myself, I participated in all the activities of a drama society. Any one who has been involved with plays would know that drama is a bottomless pool, once you have fallen into it, you will never be able to get out again! There was no way to reckon the time and energy I put into this activity.

What kind of days were those? Whenever I think back, I never cease to be amazed. Apart from getting each issue of the magazine out and providing impetus to the activities of the Breakthrough movement, I was involved in writing plays, rehearsals, advertising, public relations, editing programs for the plays ..... There seemed to be a ceaseless flow of energy gushing forth from a magic fountain. Or maybe there was a fairy helping me. Whenever the clock struck the midnight hour, the fairy would wave her magic wand, all my fatigue would disappear and I would be able to continue to work through the rest of the night. As long as I could stay awake all night, I knew I could finish the work. Almost all the important creative writing, all the meeting of deadlines, were done in the middle of the night. For many years, my breath moved in harmony with the breath of the night.

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*Large gatherings of songs and performances by Breakthrough for the young people.

Incredible as it may seem, I was a sick person in and out of hospitals at the time.

In the editorial room, in the meeting room, I was the person in charge of everything. In discussion groups, training sessions, readers' camps, I was full of energy. But as soon as I stepped into the hospital, I was stripped of my humanity layer by layer. I was only a number, a name to be called, a case history. The doctors and nurses don't care what kind of work you do; they don't care whether what you do has anything to do with other people (they could not have time for this kind of thing); you are only a patient to them. They can only look at you from the medical point of view, to find out if you have any serious problems. As for your infirmity, or how your medications affect your health, your moods, your life, your work, you have to take care of them yourself. You have to figure out for yourself how to accept it, how to face it.

My self-image drops to an all-time low every time I go to the hospital for check-ups. One is no longer an esteemed, respected person with individual character. One becomes a number, a name to be called and a case history. One becomes like a little girl, afraid to be scolded, shouted at. One's dignity can be bruised any time.

I really dislike going to hospitals. It is a battle-field, a place full of tension. It is a place that makes people feel uncomfortable and is a very unhappy place. Every time I walk into a hospital — even if it is to visit friends — as soon as I smell that familiar smell, many unpleasant memories come back to me. My heart aches and I feel that I want to escape to the outside world.

The quarterly medical checks required divide my entire year, my entire life into neat little sections. When I have seen the doctor four times, it means one year has passed. Forty visits mean ten years (What a dreadful thought!) Apart from this, there is the lung check every half year or year, the complete physical with radioisotopes every year or year-and-a-half. All these are part of my "duty"

To a patient who has been chronically ill for any length of time, the sickness becomes a nuisance both to her and the doctor after a while. During some of the regular visits, the doctor who had been seeing patients all afternoon would lift his weary head, take one glance at me and start writing with his head bent. He would fire away his questions like an artillery, "How have you been doing? Do you feel tired, with no energy, feel any palpitations of the heart, short of breath, or unable to do things?...." Before I could open my mouth, the doctor would have finished writing up the case history, completed the prescription. So I would smile gently and reply, "I have all these symptoms, but I have gotten used to them." The doctor would then hand me the prescription in a matter-of-fact manner, and I would leave the doctor's office calmly.

Without energy, I would not be able to work. Then how was I to spend my days? Very few doctors had ever asked me about my life. Those questions are not the responsibility of doctors, they belong to social workers. However, I had not seen a social worker. I was fortunate.

On the whole, I played my part as much as I could, even though it involved unpleasantries. This is especially true with radioisotope check-ups. I had to get ready for it a whole month before-hand. There were certain medications that had to be stopped, certain foods to be avoided and I would fall into the state of instability again. I would always think of some way to get the doctor to delay the check-up," Don't you think I am doing very well? I don't think there are any problems." Basically, I was not concerned about my health, I was just trying to get away from my "duty". Every time I had gone through this kind of check, my family and friends would ask for the results and would breathe a sigh of relief when they heard that all was well. I myself would breathe a sigh of relief too, because I don't really want to cause any more trouble.

There were a few times the doctor discussed with me the possibility of further treatment--- to ingest a large amount of radioactive iodine to treat the cancer in the lung.

"You should opt for a more thorough treatment, so you won't be like a time-bomb, ready to explode anytime," a doctor advised. "Actually, this treatment is very simple. However, you do have to come into the hospital for a few days, there may be some side-effects."

As soon as I heard that, my heart went into a knot. I am not afraid of illness, it is the treatment that I dread. I have tasted the side-effects of treatment. If I go one step further, I am afraid my abnormalcy would be greatly magnified.

Fortunately, this suggestion was put aside. Basically, it was probably because the black dots in my lungs had stayed the same, never increasing in number or size.

On one occasion, a doctor who did not know my past history saw my X-rays and was greatly disturbed. He ordered a complete physical for me immediately because he thought the number of black spots in my lungs had increased and were also growing bigger.

When I heard this piece of news, my heart sank. I thought, "The time-bomb is about to explode."

At the time, I was planning a visit to mainland China. It was a dream come true, something I could not allow to be thwarted. I had already struggled about it for a long time because of my health, not knowing whether I would be able to make the trip or not. Now that I was ready to leave, I really did not want to delay the trip due to health reasons.

"Doctor, can we wait till I return from China before we do this check-up? I am afraid that if anything goes wrong, I will not be able to go. This trip is very important to me, even more than my health." My reaction was swift, and my decision was firm.

I do not know whether the doctor was surprised, but he did not object. When I returned from China, the more I thought about the matter, the more doubts I had. Finally, I plucked up the courage to ask the doctor to do a thorough investigation into the matter. When he got the old X-rays out for comparison, he discovered that his diagnosis was a false alarm. There were indeed black spots in the lungs, but they were no different from the previous ones.

This is what is so baffling about my illness. You could not say my cancer was cured, because you could still see black spots on my lungs. You could not say I was a patient suffering from cancer, because the cancer seemed to be totally inactive and had stopped spreading.

My medical examinations did not rest with the radiology department. The endocrinologist was the one I had to keep in close touch with. I remember the time in Taiwan when I omitted a regular check-up and created a complete mess. This time I had learned my lesson. However, to be honest, I would prefer to get away from the doctors altogether. And from the doctor's point of view, to be truthful, he would probably have liked to get away from this patient too. Such a long, drawn out case, a patient with so many problems......(However, because of my long-term illness, I had established long-standing friendships with a few doctors. They treated me with patience, asking for nothing in return. At the same time, we watched each other as we matured, as we grew old. That was a very special relationship.)

In 1977, the doctor discovered by chance that my blood pressure had risen rather high and sent me to the hospital for a thorough investigation. I went through all the tests a doctor could possibly think up, but they could not find anything.

"Maybe it is hereditary hypertension." With this, the doctor began to give me medication to lower my blood pressure.

Alas, it was a disaster! Even the slightest dose of the mildest type of blood pressure medication was too much for me. As soon as I took something, my blood pressure plummeted. After this, the doctor and I worked hard at striking the right balance, but we could not stabilize my blood pressure. My blood pressure would either rise very quickly, or drop very suddenly.

"It seems that you have some problems with your autonomic nervous system. There is no way to tell when it happened. Maybe it was damaged during one of the operations, or maybe during radiotherapy something was inadvertently destroyed, or---" The doctor eventually gave up trying. However, he added this warning to me, "Whatever it is, you should decrease your work load. You must let go of the responsibility of chief editor of "Breakthrough" magazine. I seldom give people personal advice. This is an exception." This doctor is a friend I have known for a long time and he understood my work situation.

So something has gone wrong with the autonomic nervous system. Of course I am not fit to be the chief editor. Since the doctor had advised me thus, I should heed his counsel.

But the doctor did not know that at the time, we were planning "Breakthrough Junior" magazine. If I let go of one responsibility, I still had another one.

It seems I cannot stop caring for others. A few years after we had pioneered "Breakthrough" magazine, I began to be concerned for another group of young people who were in more need. They belonged to this awkward age group where one is generally ignored. Too few people have tried to understand them, to enter into their world. Actually, the ages from 10 to 15 are very crucial years in the maturing process of an individual, with immense changes occurring both physiologically and psychologically. For the growing young person, these changes are sometimes very difficult to handle. Neither are they easy for the adults to accept. If youngsters do not receive the appropriate care and guidance, they could easily turn into rebels against society. Some may even harm themselves seriously and leave permanent battle scars. It is so sad that this unfortunate group of youngsters were not receiving the tender care they needed. To make things worse, they had been mercilessly trampled upon by the mass media. Violence, sex and all sorts of evil were continuously eroding their minds. They had been stripped of their innocence. The buds were allowed to fade away before they blossomed.

Of course, I was not the only person who saw their need. A group of concerned citizens — including psychologists, doctors, pastors, social workers, teachers, communications specialists — had all seen what was happening. When we got together, we enthusiastically decided the emphasis would be using both hands and brains; put into practice what was being learned; the spirit of creativity etc. Those would be the qualities "Breakthrough Junior" aimed to develop in adolescents. Thus a brand new movement for adolescents was born amidst enthusiasm.

Actually, I never wrote any articles for "Breakthrough Junior", neither was it my responsibility to do the editing. My duties were in circulation, advertising, public relations, management and finances.......

After I gave up my position as chief editor for "Breakthrough", the publishing department expanded in several directions. Apart from the magazine, it started to publish books. Owing to some personnel factors beyond my control, I found myself taking charge of the management and finances of the publishing department. This seemed rather a big joke. On the one hand, the doctor had asked me to let go of some of my responsibilities, and here I was, picking up even more burdensome ones. At a juncture when people thought I had all the time in the world to do as I wished, I found myself in a more demanding position. On the other hand, my character, abilities and training, gave no hint of talent in management and finance. When I was in High school, I was no good at Math. In fact, I would get a migraine as soon as I saw numbers. There I was, in charge of an account that reached into the two and three millions. Moreover, there was supposed to be something wrong with my autonomic nervous system, but I ended up in charge of the business activities in the publishing department. On top of that, the work kept expanding and the whole thing became more and more incredible.

This big joke in a way robbed me of my health and caused it to deteriorate further. "Breakthrough Junior" was tougher and more of a challenge than we had anticipated. This "television generation" does not have a habit of reading healthy materials. There are too many things to distract them. Apart from television, there are video games, model race cars, designer jeans and brand name sneakers ...... There are also the evil, provoking "comic books" ...... From childhood, they have leapt straight into adulthood, missing out on their youth.

"Breakthrough Junior" met with a lot of setbacks on all sides: finances, personnel support, marketing. Though we all braced ourselves with pioneer spirit, nevertheless we became bruised and worn out. However, we were not discouraged. On the contrary, we were even more convinced that our original vision in starting this youth movement was right. As we stepped into the '80s, the problems of youth became like a time-bomb. Once ignited, those young people who were silent and ignored would use force, rebellion, self-destruction and self-abandonment to accuse society. All of a sudden, the adults would find themselves face to face with a group of half-grown kids playing dangerous games. The consequences of these games might destroy the adult world. And these kids might turn out to be their own children, brothers, sisters, students.

"Breakthrough Junior" was a worthwhile cause. I do not have any regrets. But I did have to pay the price of my health for this vision.

As the person in charge of the publication department and the driving force behind the youth movement, my life was busy and full of pressures. As a sick person with an abnormal health pattern, I had my own style of living and doing things. Apart from a few bosom comrades, there were very few people who really understood my problems. In effect, I was basically alone in my daily struggle trying to live a normal life with abnormal constraints.

From a medical point of view, I was really not a seriously ill patient. There were many, many sick people who were experiencing extended sufferings, the thought of which would make anyone shiver. However, also from the medical view point, my case history was always regarded as "record breaking". At the same time, it made the doctors feel helpless.

One time I had serious bronchitis and went to see an ENT specialist. When he was examining me, he uncovered some astonishing facts:

"Did any body ever tell you that one of your vocal cords has been damaged?"

I looked at him, dumb-founded and shook my head.

"My guess is that it was damaged during one of your operations or during radiotherapy. However, since you speak so clearly, it is hard to believe that you only have one cord in use. You know, under normal circumstances, we need both of our vocal cords to work together. If there is only one, the patient would need to go through special therapy sessions in order to learn to speak again."

"However," he added, "You should be careful and let your voice box rest as much as possible. You larynx can become infected very easily. You should not speak for more than half an hour at a stretch."

It was only then that I found out.

There was a time after one of my operations that I was unable to speak for a long time. Now I know it was because one of my vocal cords was damaged. But after a while, it improved and I never went through any therapy sessions for it. During the period before my "major collapse", when my health was a lot sturdier, I was able to speak to crowds of hundreds without a microphone. On the other hand, my larynx did get infected very easily. Whenever I had bronchitis, my vocal cords would also be affected. If it was serious, there would be weeks when I became dumb. No wonder people thought I was strange: sometimes my voice would be sweet and moving, at other times it would be hoarse and unpleasant. Sometimes I would speak loudly and clearly, other times, I was so faint that people had to put their ears to my mouth before they could hear me.

Of course, the calcium imbalance had its effects too. Maybe there were other reasons. There were many occasions when I had difficulty in breathing, shortness of breath, lacked the strength to speak. This kind of situation was getting more and more serious. At this present moment, I have been experiencing difficulties in public speaking. It is a nuisance.

Another problem was dryness in the mouth. According to the doctor, it was probable that my salivary glands were slightly damaged during radiotherapy, so the secretions in my mouth were not quite normal. Apart from that, an imbalance of electrolytes in the body (such as calcium, potassium, sodium etc.) also leads to dryness in the mouth, thirst. In addition, the tranquillizers that I constantly take also cause dryness in the mouth. On the surface, this is a small matter. But when the mouth gets seriously dry, the throat is so parched that it feels as if it is being torn apart and the pain is unbearable. This leads to a lot of inconveniences too — especially when travelling — I had to keep drinking water. Without water, I could not speak; without water, I could not eat. All this gave me trouble in my daily activities and in my work.

Another and bigger obstacle was the damage to my oesophagus.

At first, I had no idea that my oesophagus had been damaged, neither did the doctor, because there were no symptoms at the beginning. After a while, I found myself taking longer and longer to eat (when I was young, I was always the first to finish my meal) and it progressed to a stage when I was unbearably slow. At the same time, swallowing food was becoming a problem. If I did not chew carefully, I could easily choke to death. Finally, I started having trouble swallowing even water and my medicine. So the doctor gave me a special test and discovered an area in my oesophagus where the muscles were not contracting normally. It was at the narrowest point. If the atrophy continued, I would only be able to swallow liquids and would be literally starved to death. At the very least, I would not be able to walk around and do my normal share of work.

I asked the doctor if there was anything he could do. He waivered and replied.

"There are ways. An operation can stretch the oesophagus. But as long as you can swallow, even slowly, we should not consider operating for the time being."

I nodded and did not pursue the question. Experience told me that another operation would bring more damage to my natural system and fresh troubles.

I took my problem to an older friend, a cancer specialist doing research in the most famous cancer hospital in the United States. She thought about it seriously for a while and then said,

"It has been many years now since you had your operations and radiotherapy, you should have passed the worst peak by now. Let us hope, let us pray that things will not get worse. If you can do without the operation, you should just let it be."

Hope and prayer — these are the sources of energy that keep me going each day.

The doctors knew better than anyone else that my life was not in their hands.

The electrolytes in my body could tip the balance at any time, leading immediately to dangerous consequences and my life would be threatened. Even if I took my daily medications in the correct dosages, an imbalance could come about in the electrolytes in my system because there are other factors that influence such chemical reactions. Even the medical professors at the frontiers of research could not explain it all.

I often asked the doctors, "How come I am like this... or that... " but they could only give faltering answers.

Some doctors who were also personal friends would tease me sometimes, "After you are dead, we should open up your body and find out what is so special about you."

From my point of view, all I desired was to be a "normal" person. I longed to live a life just like everybody else, normal and without incident.

Compared to a lot of sick people — especially those who are sick and poor — I count myself fortunate. Sometimes sitting in the government hospitals, mixing with those patients, some of whom were half bald, who had dark bruises on their skin, some with sullen looks of despair in their eyes, I felt very much out of place. It seemed that I had answered the wrong "roll call" or entered the "wrong door" because there I was, looking fresh and neatly dressed with shining eyes that were still alert and keen.

The real agony lies in being ill for long periods of time, for the entire life span. Such circumstances can make one lose interest in life and lead to despair and depression.

My fetters and inconveniences were not limited to those I have just been describing!

In the past few years, my life has been very unstable. Everyday, every hour, there were unannounced changes. It could be something wrong with the endocrine system, it could be a calcium or other electrolyte imbalance, it could be the heart or bad circulation. I had no idea as to what was happening and probably the doctors didn't either. There were mornings when I would wake up and find myself very weak, dizzy almost to the point of fainting. Fear would grip me because it seemed this was to be my final moment. I would get the urge to ask my family to call the doctor, take me to the emergency room. But I managed to stop all these impulses. I would lie there quietly, just lie there, maybe for half a morning, or the whole morning. I would lie down till I could summon enough energy to rise and go to work. The people at the office would see me doing my normal work and would never have guessed that I had to go through such immense struggles.

There were times when I would be working normally in the office, having just come out of a meeting, or while I was talking to clients, and all of a sudden my heart would start beating like crazy. I would feel dizzy and go into shock and would have to lie down immediately and take one of the tranquillizers that I carried around with me. This kind of situation was sometimes very serious and called for complete rest. Sometimes it was not so bad and I could resume work after resting for a while.

What was so distressing was that sometimes the calcium level in my blood would rise or my blood pressure would shoot up. In a way, this made me appear to be healthier than normal and everybody would tell me that I looked "in shining high spirits". Little did they know that I was in the danger zone.

I am the type of person that takes responsibilities seriously and a little too earnestly. Most of the time, I tried to do more than I had the energy for. According to some medical friends, my thyroid glands had been removed and were no longer supplying me with the secretions normal people require to keep up with the needs of the body. Whenever I get excited, another gland in the body—the adrenal gland —would have to react to the emergency and supply large amounts of adrenalin. Actually, adrenalin is meant for emergency use only. It is bad strategy to call upon it in normal circumstances. Moreover, every time there was excitement, and after each emergency call, there would be extreme fatigue which was not good for the body. Unfortunately, those who saw me "in shining high spirits" never saw the exhausted state I was in after each excitement. Otherwise, they might have been a bit more concerned about me.

This kind of sick person is seldom understood. Fortunately, the co-founder of "Breakthrough", Dr. C, is himself a doctor and he is the only person who understands the kind of life I lead. He can fathom my character, the way I deal with people, the responsibilities I wanted to take up and the dangers lurking in my background. For this, I am eternally grateful. If it were not for his concern, his care and understanding, these difficult days would have been very bitter.

It was in this state, hovering between being normal and abnormal, that I finished my schooling. I traversed the continents and the oceans, I edited magazines, I wrote, I administered, I started a movement ... on borrowed time, I was urged on by an expectancy, I would not let myself go easily, I could not afford to let time slip by in a meaningless fashion.

Like the apostle Paul, I have a thorn in my body. Maybe I never asked God officially to remove the thorn like Paul did (maybe in my subconscious, I feel what has happened to me has already happened and I cannot ask Him to undo it), but the message from God is just as sure, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

O Death,
You Cannot Kill Me

O Lord,
grant me the serenity to
accept the things
I cannot change,
the courage to change
the things I can, and
the wisdom to know the difference.

Anonymous

Before I left the United States to start work in Taiwan, I had the feeling that I was heading for the "unknown". My heart was somewhat uneasy and I was a little afraid. At the time, I copied down the words of a song on a card and gave them to the two teachers who were closest to me and to whom I was most indebted — the two professors in my department that I respected most — and I asked them to pray for me. It was a hymn, with an Irish tune. It has always been one of my favorite hymns:

I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to bear.
I would be friend to all, the friendless, the foe;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up to God, and laugh, and love, and lift.

At the time I copied down this little hymn, I had no idea that there was so much strife ahead of me, so that I needed to be strong. Nor did I know there were to be so many trials to bear that I would be required to be brave. I am so glad that I copied down the hymn and gave it to these seasoned warriors of life, because I needed their support so much.

The trust that was bestowed on me by those who trusted me, and the concerned bestowed on me by those who cared formed a reliable wall around me to prevent me from falling. When I was discouraged, despondent, weary to the point of abandoning all hope, I would lean on this wall to catch my breath, to cry, until I was comforted. There were so many times I lost faith. I degenerated almost to the point of being disloyal to life ...... I fell into a dark pit and could not see the way out for a long, long time. Eventually, I made it out by clinging to the wall. What kind of wisdom was it that inspired the hymn writer to write such insightful words? What kind of tender loving grace that made me copy the hymn down, to inscribe it in my own heart and to write it on the hearts of others?

After spending most of my life struggling with illness and in agony, I clearly realized that death itself could not kill me. Only a loss of faith in life, a loss of the desire to keep living could do that.

Death is not formidable. It is more difficult to keep on living. In death, one can give up in despair, shut oneself off, hide in obscurity or abuse oneself. But to keep on living, one needs to have self-respect, love for the self, be willing to open up and accept oneself. To continue to live requires a lot of faith and courage. It needs a driving force.

During one of my hospital stays in my "major collapse", things were not going too well and I had to request that the "No visitors" sign be hung outside my door. Apart from one "auntie" who was taking care of me, no one was allowed in.

One afternoon, there was a light knock at the door and two heads peeped in. It was a girl and a boy, from the Christian fellowship at the medical school that I had been counselling. Auntie immediately came forward to prevent them from coming in. In a moment, she came back with a bunch of fresh flowers and a card.

"I took care of them for you."

"Have they left?" I stared at the flowers and felt guilty. In a second, I was up sitting in my bed and said, "Please ask them to come back. I would like to see them."

(Contradictions!)

When the door opened, I saw two awkward faces.

"We won't stay for long." The boy mumbled. "We just wanted to see you face to face ...... "

The girl nudged the boy, her cheeks began to blush, "We practised a song ...... "

The boy continued, "Yes, we practised a hymn and we would like to sing it to you ...... "

I then noticed the hymn books in their hands.

"We have been practising for a long time, but we are still not very good at it ...... "

I saw One hanging on a tree, In agony and blood;
He fixed His languid eyes on me,

As near His cross I stood.
It was for me, upon a tree He died in agony,
And now I give my life to live, for Him who died for
me.

The air was filled with the alto and tenor voices. The harmony was not perfect, but when I closed my eyes and listened, I felt I had never heard such sweet music! I felt everything around me changing. Although my eyes were closed, I could feel that the whole room was bathed in an over-flowing indescribable light.

This scenario has been engraved in my heart since.

It was the "One hanging on the tree" who once again explained suffering to me. His weary face, His dessicated body make it clear that He has completely identified with the human race in its sufferings. The cross is a sign that makes people shudder. The One has given the death sentence to death for eternity.

That One gave meaning to my life.

Her relatively short life on earth has left indelible marks in the lives of many Chinese young people throughout the world. She served as the chief editor and founder of several highly influential Chinese Christian magazines: "Campus", "Sentinel", "Breakthrough" and "Breakthrough Junior". Though her body was fragile, her spirit was empowered by God. Though she was wrestling daily with death, yet one could not help but be touched by the vitality of her life. **Death, Be Not Proud** is Josephine's song of victory over the ultimate enemy.

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